

mayborn

WORDS

SO INNOCENT
AND POWERLESS

AS THEY ARE, AS STANDING
IN A DICTIONARY,
HOW POTENT FOR
GOOD AND EVIL

THEY BECOME IN
THE HANDS OF ONE WHO
KNOWS HOW TO
COMBINE THEM.

- NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

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SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM

UNT

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Adviser's Note



Photo by Leah E. Waters

"And Max said 'No!'"

Not an expected choice for a quote illustrating this year's Mayborn Literary Conference's "The Power of Words" theme. But let me explain: This is the crescendo statement in *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak. A personal favorite of both my sons and I, ever since the oldest was about three (so long ago!).

Why? Because Max, the hero boy in the story who felt powerless at home (sent to his room without dinner, for gosh sakes), rebuked the horrible Wild Things and stilled their terrifying gnashing and roaring as they rushed to eat him—just by speaking those words.

For small boys (and later big boys), it was an immediately understandable lesson in empowerment and the Power of Words. There was always a smile and a triumphant laugh at that line as Nathan and Lucas felt the unbridled joy of discovering an inner courageous self. One simple line... a lifelong heart of a lion.

Our Mayborn writers have worked their tails off under the horrible gnashing and roaring of logistical nightmares, travel costs and deadlines to bring you that kind of epiphany, filling these pages with words they hope will inspire, move, entertain and even strike awe within.

The writers they've profiled, the events they've documented, are the Things that will do just that. We are blessed by this year's conference speakers, some who you will read about in these pages, even as we say goodbye to a Man whose words and heart have created a tribe of literary storytellers.

I'm teary eyed as I reflect on the lost times reading to my boys, the encouraging and sometimes stirring profiles of our conference speakers, the impact George Getschow has had on my life, and the talent and heart of my dear writers. My life has been indelibly enriched.

All with words, about words.



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EDITORS' NOTE

There's a scene in *A League of Their Own* where Tom Hanks' character Jimmy confronts Dottie, played by the radiant Geena Davis, about quitting baseball, him and the team. Dottie says, "It just got too hard." Jimmy, voice low and eyes earnest, gives Dottie an offer she can't refuse.

"It's supposed to be hard. If it were easy, everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great."



It begins similar to most graduate classes: A dozen or so students all trying to earn that coveted "A" and create the best research paper, final project or story possible. But something changes somewhere in the first few weeks. It happens with little fanfare, but you feel it—this disparate group of literary travelers is uniting around a common goal. They're answering the call, and most importantly, they're answering it together.

That call is to interview some of the world's greatest literary minds and somehow, someday, condense their hundreds of years of wisdom and passion into a top-tier magazine. This year, the Mayborn magazine class tackled "The Power of Words"—no easy feat when you're talking to Charles Johnson, Sebastian Junger, Katherine Boo and a score of others from the best magazines and newspapers in the world. Their

differences aside, these writers all share one important quality: They use words to understand and explain what often seems inexplicable and enigmatic.

Poverty, war, racism and competitive eating all come under the microscope as these writers try to explain the least explainable and understandable topic of all: Humanity. Their novels, essays, tomes and op-eds are, in part, reflections on the human condition, be they humans in Afghanistan, India or a leper colony in Hawaii. Just as they could write forever and never completely convey the complexities of the human spirit, so could we write for endless semesters, producing magazine after magazine and still never tell every story we aspired to tell in this magazine.

But that's the beauty of this strange, wonderful, infuriating and beautiful pursuit—there will always be more stories to tell, more words to wield. This class will continue to answer the call, even if we no longer do it together. Whenever it gets too hard, we'll have this magazine, these writers and their stories to turn to for solace, wisdom and guidance—and we won't stop.

Because the hard is what makes it great.

Tyler Hicks & Leah E. Waters, Managing Editors

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Cheers to you, George by his friends and family
Just a few of the hundreds of writers influenced by the Mayborn's retiring writer-in-residence, and one son, share their thoughts about the man we love.

We're proud to celebrate journalism that makes a difference.

OUR JOURNALISTS ARE HONORED to serve as guest speakers at the conference. It is our privilege to encourage, mentor, nurture and reward those who have a passion for intelligent writing.

For more than a decade, *The Dallas Morning News* has been a major sponsor of The Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference, presented by the Frank W. Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism at the University of North Texas.

And we are excited to provide scholarships for several of this year's attendees and to continue to sponsor The Mayborn Young Spurs Excellence and Opportunity Initiative for high school and community college student writers.



Frank Christlieb
Judge

Tom Huang
Moderator

Michael Lindenberger
Workshop Leader

Dianne Solis
Moderator

David Tarrant
Judge

Chris Vognar
Moderator

Jeffrey Weiss
Speaker

What are the most powerful WORDS ever written?

Story by Angela Roe

Ask a writer to tell a story, and they won't shut up. Ask a writer to identify the most powerful words ever written, and you get crickets. "You want me to do what?" was the general sentiment received when I innocently posed the question to some of the nation's most prolific literary professionals - all Mayborn conference alumni - it should be noted. Or, like one writer I asked showed me, you get rebuked and labeled small-minded for ever proposing such an ill-conceived query. "I don't write for free," the unnamed

author told me. Understood, sir.

But I persisted in asking my question, bending and reconstructing to appease and ease the consciences of those in our tribe who simply couldn't bring themselves to choose the most powerful, or "best" words. To a mere few, the prompt became: "what words resonate with you on a primal level?" and for whatever reason, the question's re-phrasing brought about comfort, and the courage to respond.

To each of the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference speakers,

past and present, who mused on my possibly naive but wholly earnest inquiry, I extend my deepest gratitude. Because to enter into this conversation takes courage. It's not for us readers to assume that any writer here is dubbing his or her entry as king, but to embrace their selections as a glimpse into their most inward beings, at words that have pierced them so that they never forget. May we also never forget the powerful prose on these pages, and be grateful for the ways that words change us.

Light thy fire.

Joan of Arc was tied to the stake, and the fire was prepared at her feet, and she was given one last chance to recant and to confess, to save her own life. That's pretty much it for me... just that kind of adherence to principle and heroism and rejection of the authoritarian state is just a complete and adamant "F--- you" to the imposition of the arbitrary authority of people who are way too powerful and stripped of human kindness. That kind of statement has saved humanity over and over again. Very few people are willing to do that.

Sebastian Junger, New York Times bestselling author, speaker, documentary filmmaker

Tell me a story.

The four-word command certainly ranks among the most powerful words in any language.

Long before Herodotus, even before the first written word, humans have found deep meaning in storytelling. Stories explain the past and provide meaning by placing us into a larger tale. We see our lives in the form of a story. From answering our partner's question "how was your day?" to dreaming of our future, our structure is storytelling.

For that reason, narrative non-fiction thrives. A mere recitation of facts is an encyclopedia. A story is an engaging piece of art to which readers are invariably drawn. When readers pick up a article or book by a member of the Mayborn Tribe, it's because it answers the call, "Tell me a story."

James McGrath Morris, journalist and biographer

Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani.

When American politicians are asked to name a book or a piece of writing that has most influenced them, they typically use the question as an opportunity to demonstrate that they are conversant in the language of faith rather than the language of literature. They name the Bible as their favorite book, and passages from scripture as their favorite text, and because they have nothing to say they often leave the impression that they've said nothing. So let me apologize in advance for resorting to the habits of political discourse in order to name the most powerful words ever spoken, because although they come from New Testament they are anything but political. Indeed, they amount to a confession of sorts—a confession by one man that other men thought to write down—and so the source of their power is not simply philosophical or theological; it's journalistic.

The words are "Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani," and they were spoken by Jesus of Nazareth as he died in on the cross in

Golgotha, two millennia ago. They appear in the gospels of Mark and Matthew, who then helpfully translate them as “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” But it is not the translation that rings through the ages; it’s the original Aramaic—the fact that the evangelists chose to leave Jesus’s wail of despair and abandonment in the language of rural Jewish peasantry. As a result, it is a wail, naked and undefended, and we can still hear it, all these years later. We might not all agree that he is a god, or God Himself; but there is no doubting that he was a man who lived and suffered; nor is there any doubting that—whatever you believe about his divinity—he died believing himself as powerless and utterly broken as any mere mortal...as any one of us.

It is the only time we hear Jesus speak as he actually spoke, in his native tongue, and to understand the power of those words, we need only compare what Luke offered in their place: “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.” Next to the brutality of the original, it seems obviously inauthentic and contrived. Any competent screenwriter could have come up with “Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit,” but only Jesus could have uttered “Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani” —which is why those words have given me a chill from the first moment I heard them as a little boy, and why they perhaps set me on my course as a reporter. You see, the Aramaic sentence that Jesus spoke in his darkest hour is not only an echo of one of the Psalms, and not only a challenge to both God and man.

It is history’s killer quote.

Tom Junod, senior writer, ESPN

I love you.

I love the end of *Great Gatsby*. And I love Poe, and the words of Jefferson and Lincoln. And just about anything from Cormac McCarthy or Norman Mailer has the power to stir you. But I think the most powerful words ever written or spoken are still: “I love you.” Those three words—and various iterations of the sentiment around the world—have more power than all the artillery on the planet. It’s so universal that the idea is tossed around frivolously, but when someone expresses it earnestly and genuinely, either in writing or in speech, it has the power to start wars, to build empires, and to change not only the person hearing it but the people saying it, too.

Mike Mooney, New York Times bestseller author, writer for Rolling Stone, GQ, and others, co-director, Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference

Let there be light.

In any reflection on the power of words, it seems only polite to give God the first word, and credit for the head-scratching assertion that in the beginning was the word – ideas outside of time – and then, somehow, the word was made flesh, and we were off and rolling down through the years. Flesh could not contain creation’s original state of timelessness, but our words could, and have, and therein lies much of their power, because without the endurance of words, there is no story to tell of humanity’s journey out of darkness.

The greatness of words has no season, although we can trace the chronology of their expression. From the ancient prophets – “Do unto others” – and the founding fathers – “All men are created equal” – and the extraordinary leaders in my own lifetime – “I have a dream” ... “Ask not what your country can do for you” – wise words of inspiration and resolve have guided our civilization, just as they have channeled our individual paths.

And yet at this silvery stage in my life, perhaps as an antidote to the cynicism that seems to tempt our nation daily, I find myself most moved by the gentle lexicon of grace, the vocabulary of blessings, mindful of the power of remembrance that inhabits our language. And so I think of the words of Stanley Kunitz, that a writer’s work is not an expression of the desire for praise or recognition, or prizes, but the deepest manifestation of your gratitude for the gift of life.

The synonym for words is life.

Bob Shacocis, National Book Award winner, Pulitzer Prize finalist

Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press.

These succinct words from the 1st Amendment have never seemed more necessary to our lives, both public and private. Nor have they ever seemed to be more directly threatened or disdained by certain elements of our society—including, it seems, the highest office in our land. They’re the most powerful words ever written because they insure that all other words can be written. Let us continually remind ourselves of their bedrock importance—there’s a reason freedom of speech is the first amendment—and defend them with all the vicious vigilance of a mother wolf guarding her den.

Hampton Sides, editor-at-large, Outside Magazine, best-selling author

I’m an artist and artists don’t retire. I’m exactly where I should be – doing what I’m supposed to be doing.

Since I’m officially retired from UNT, I feel I have an obligation to speak directly and unequivocally to an important matter that illuminated how I feel about retirement. Do artists really retire? Singer/songwriter Judy Collins recently addressed the question in a way that I hope will inspire all aging artists like me. Collins, 78, is about to embark on a whirlwind tour with

her old boyfriend, Stephen Stills.

George Getschow, Pulitzer Prize finalist, founder, Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference

The Negro's identification with the life of the Delta is fundamental and complete.

He came here as a slave with the earliest settlers. He has remained to live and multiply as a freedman. This land is first and last his handiwork. It was he who brought order out of a primeval wilderness, felling the trees, digging the ditches, and draining the swamps. He erected the homes which shelter him and the white man. He built the schools, the courts, the jails, the factories and warehouses. He was a roustabout on the river boats which connected the Delta with the outside world, and toiled up the steep banks of the landings bearing incredible loads on shining black shoulders ... The Negro was builder, too, of the railroads which were forever to extinguish the glory of steamboating on the Mississippi and the gorgeous dynasty of the river captains. Later he built the concrete roads which in turn were to cripple the railroads. The vast ramparts of the levees upon whose existence the life of the Delta depends sprang from the sweat and brawn of the Negro. Wherever one looks in this land, whatever one sees that is the work of man, was erected by the toiling, straining bodies of blacks."

I'm originally from Mississippi, and in the early 1980s, while doing some reporting down there, I came across a book called "Where I Was Born and Raised," by a native Mississippian named David Cohn who was from the Delta region and wrote about it for *The Atlantic*. There's this passage in the opening essay, "The Delta Land." Cohn is describing the region as it was in the 1930s—a vanished world, really—but some observations by him are basically timeless. This is powerful to me, in part, because it's an eloquent reminder of "what is owed."

Alex Heard, editorial director, Outside Magazine, author

Letters form words and words form sentences; and the sentences written upon talismans are nothing but a collection of spirits which, though they may astonish the ordinary man, do not trouble the wise; for the wise know the power of words and are aware that words govern the whole world. Whether they are written or spoken, words can destroy kings and ruin empires.

Thousand Nights and the One Night (three volume translation by Malcolm and Ursula Lyons) and jotted it down in my notebook. The Arabian Nights, as it's sometimes called, is a collection of folktales in Persian, Arabic and other languages collected many centuries ago and first translated into English in 1706. Nobody knows who created these tales, some of them deeply philosophical, others little more than elaborate jokes. But they're arranged in a framing narrative about a beautiful young woman, Scheherazade, who tells them one a night to a Sultan who plans to kill her. Each night she leaves her tale unfinished until the next night, and thus she survives to finish her tale and begin yet another. A fine example of the life-and-death power of words, which not only can topple a throne or a presidential candidate, but can save the teller's life. As a writer, I find that a useful reminder.

Bill Marvel, former Dallas Morning News senior staff writer, author

You see, we may encounter any defeats, but we must not be defeated.

It may even be necessary to encounter the defeat, so that we can know who we are. So that we can see, oh, that happened, and I rose. I did get knocked down flat in front of the whole world, and I rose. I didn't run away - I rose right where I'd been knocked down. And then that's how you get to know yourself. You say, hmm, I can get up! I have enough of life in me to make somebody jealous enough to want to knock me down. I have so much courage in me that I have the effrontery, the incredible gall to stand up. That's it. That's how you get to know who you are."

The following inspiring passage is from the late Maya Angelou, who said similar words to different people at different times. This version comes from an interview with *Psychology Today*, published in 2009. This quotation is especially inspiring to those of us who work for *The Undeclared*, as the words provide the foundation for what we try to stand for and accomplish at *The Undeclared*. You could say that Maya Angelou is the spiritual godmother of our platform. Being Undeclared is the story of African Americans in this country, overcoming obstacles, producing success out of heartbreak. It is also the story of sports anywhere at any level, the agony of defeat and the ability to rise from it and be better because of it.

Kevin Merida, senior vice president, ESPN; editor-in-chief, The Undeclared blog

Will you marry me?

“Sure, great generals and statesmen had delivered stirring words and wise authors through the years have given us beautiful passages, but it is love that makes the world go round, and daring to share a marriage is at the heart of our world.

Frank Deford - NPR's Morning Edition, novelist, acclaimed sportswriter, who sadly passed away May 28, 2017

LEMON
BUDINO
AT THE
STRATHMORE
INN

Jason Fagone's suspicious hour

Story and Photos by Kevin Ryan

It was painfully quiet as the waiter gathered the empty soufflé bowls, and Fagone looked itchy, one hand on the crumb-dappled table and one hand scavenging at the grey beneath his eyes, “So did you get what you needed from me?” In other words, could he go now?

I’d been ordering food and drink for an hour just to keep him at the table, and there was nothing left. But I had seen it coming. After landing in Philly, I texted him, told him I’d like to get as much time as possible for the profile. Let’s get some lunch, he replied. Get the leg in the door—the whole damn leg in the door. It was Monday, and my next flight wasn’t until Friday morning, so I had three full days to travel around Maryland. It was a longshot, but it would make a hell of a story if I could wrangle Fagone into coming along. After all, that’s the kind of guy he is in his writing.

The train from Philly to Swarthmore would take at least an hour, and there was, supposedly, a massive snowstorm heading for the East Coast—it was all anyone could talk about. So I shelled out the \$40 for an Uber to the Swarthmore train station. The sunlight was blinding as I got out of the car. A few minutes later, Fagone rounded the corner in an Army-green jacket built like an expensive sleeping bag. He walked with his head mostly downward. A stroll, an amble, a long-legged

gait—the gait of a man who eschewed a basketball career to be a heavy reader. His pendulum legs swung drab-brown pants, vining down to a pair of unworn Adidas Gazelles. There was a sizeable gash below his right ear, a line of dried blood slanting down. He had another cut across his throat, punctuated by a nick on his Adam’s apple.

I followed him the hundred feet to Broad Table Tavern, the plastic-new restaurant of the Inn at Swarthmore. No music playing. He leaned into the reception stand, nodding at the two aproned hostesses: “Heard the latest on the blizzard?”

“A foot, maybe two, is what I heard,” said the one with menus. “If we’re going to get it, I want to get it, you know? The more feet, the better.” She led us around the unpeopled room, to the booth farthest from the door. Fagone slumped backwards, facing the restaurant. From my seat, I could see patio and a roundabout, sunlight and Fagone. He offered to pay for the meal. “That’s okay,” I said. “Care of the Mayborn.” Start with a few drinks. That’d fix us up. He told the waiter he was ready to order, as in “let’s get this over with,” eyes darting so much you couldn’t see any color. I ordered the whipped ricotta, the Broad Table Tavern cheeseburger, and a glass of Sterling Pig Big Gunz Double IPA. Fagone ordered mushroom soup and simple greens. Oh, and a Diet

Coke.

“This is for the publication that gets passed around at the conference?” Somehow, he displayed expressions indicative of both anxiety and boredom, at the same time.

To be fair, the setting had the feel of a prank. Every time one of us was about to dive into a deep moment, the overfriendly waiter interrupted. With his mustache and suspenders, he had a circus feel. The kind of guy who slams things that don’t need to be slammed. I liked the guy. It’s just that he could appear out of nowhere.

You like your beer? the waiter asked, eyes barely open.

“Oh, this is great, man.” I asked Fagone if he wanted a beer. He pursed his lips, pinch-faced like an ostrich, “No,” then returned to his story. For the first time, he was enthusiastic, and it was nice to see him excited, but he’d already said it all in (Ch. 4 of) his first book, *Horsemen of the Esophagus*—a Pynchonesque leap into the world of competitive eating.

Occasionally, he asked me questions, with the gentle sincerity of someone who is used to conducting and can’t stand having the light reversed. Either that, or he was trying to edge the time along—but we didn’t have time. I had no idea when he was going to bail, and so far, I had nothing. Nothing personal. Nothing real. Nothing he hadn’t said or



written before.

Boy I need to get you another beer, huh?

"In just a bit," I replied. It's not like Fagone is afraid to express himself, especially his contempt. Just look at his Twitter feed: Every few days he's calling somebody a Nazi. Coincidentally, the day of our interview he tweeted about one of the Mayborn Conference's sponsors: "New *Texas Monthly* editor managed to lose an enormous amount of talent in a very short time. Pissed away the franchise."

Between sips of his Diet Coke, he spoke about the characters from *Horsemen*, "So have you heard about what happened to 'El Wingador' since the book?" Bill "El Wingador" Simmons is the faded underdog of *Horsemen of the Esophagus*. "He went to prison." Fagone talked about other people's troubles. El Wingador had begun his career as a life coach. Fagone talked about his characters. His hand moved like wayward ringlets, bobbing. He laughed occasionally, and his laugh is charming. He was working on *Horsemen* when he began dating his now-wife. Nothing new about any of that.

Ready for dat beer?

"Ah, I guess so," I told the waiter, then turned to Fagone, "You mind if I drink a beer?"

"No, go for it." He stared off for a moment. "Every project is really different. You have to find your way into it kinda from scratch. The one I'm working on now, number three, it's different, still." At the mention of his newest book, he leaned into the table, then burst through into ebullience: he was going off-script. "This book has different demands, and I think if you approach it with a formula, you do an injustice to the fact that the material is different and has its own demands—I don't know—I don't know how other writers do it, really, I mean I definitely felt like I was teaching myself how to do it as I was doing it, and looking back on

it, I wish I had—from a distance of some years now, I wish I'd told the younger version of myself to chill the f--- out, 'it's gonna be all right'—because I felt like, 'This is my one chance!'—I felt like a Hollywood starlet, 'you're only gonna have one shot!' 'If this doesn't work out, my dream is going to die!' Because the truth is that book didn't sell, but I had a chance to write another one, then another one—because I had the ability to find good ideas," the tension in his shoulders had lessened, "and I understand why I was afraid, I just wish I had had more belief in it—but it's a scary thing, at first." He smacked at the last of his soup. "As long as you can stay curious and keep looking for that idea that will open into a book, you have a good chance of finding it, people are too cynical about writing a book, like you have to have powerful connections to really sell an idea, I don't think that's true, I think a lot of it rests on the idea, the idea is the coin of the realm, publishers need new voices and they need ideas—they must have them, in order to survive, so there's no editor that can't afford to look at a writer who's never written a book before." The intensity, the way he darted through his sentences. Then, his fervor vanished. It was like he could turn his personality on and off at will.

How bout a little something sweet?

Fagone ordered lemon budino and a coffee. "I'll have the same."

I sipped at the last froth of beer foam as Fagone talked about Lillian Ross' *Picture*. "She wrote it in the days before there was a Hollywood public relations apparatus. Magazine writers today would never get access to John Huston like she got access to them, because you have to go through a publicist, you have to arrange your interview with Charlize Theron, and you have an hour at some hotel bar."

I pointed at the dessert, "What's this stuff called?"

"Lemon budino."

Should I warm up your coffees for yeh? No thank you.

His eyes wandered as he connected loose ideas, as if searching for something he'd lost. "There's a writer on my block who's really good, and he has a much bigger Twitter following than me, which I was so irritated when I heard. Like, I'm not even the most well-known writer on my own block. I'm defeated by this guy," a deep, hammy groan. "I saw a YouTube video where he was singing and playing piano . . . In his preaching, he also works in jazz standards. Like he's irritatingly talented," laughing, "it's really out of control. 'We have to

move!” He grinned, face down, shielding his mouth between bites of lemon budino, I was doubled over in laughter. “My wife would make fun of me: ‘How many Twitter followers does Andy have today?’” After a moment, with a tilt, “he’s a really good dude. His daughter babysits our kid.”

The writer, Andy Crouch, was the editor at *Christianity Today*. Crouch has written nine books and earned degrees from Cornell and Boston University. “I really only know Jason as a neighbor—he seems like a great guy but I don’t have any insight to offer on his life or work.”

You like your lemon budino? Yes, we replied. Spoons digging at the few remnants that still clung. Radiated light pattered in around Fagone. After a few minutes, the waiter strode off with the last of our plates. “So did you get what you needed from me? For your profile? What exactly do you need?”

I clenched. This is basically my Japan, I said. It was a reference to Fagone’s own career as a journalist, for his first book *Horsemen of the Esophagus*, Fagone flew to Japan so that he could spend time with Takeru Kobayashi, the greatest competitive eater in the world. He would observe Kobayashi, he would trail along, learn each technique, each habit, each secret. That would guarantee his story. “I know you’re a busy guy. If this is all the time you can spare, that’s fine. I just need to get some pictures of you.” A drought overtook the space between us. Fagone sighed into the exhaustion of a sleepless worker being told to extend their shift. His face sank. As soon as I brought out the camera, he excused himself to the bathroom. Sitting there, alone, I felt stupid for having ever strived for more than this.

As I stared at crumbs on the table, a passage from *Horsemen* came to mind. In it, Fagone mocks “Coondog” O’Karma, who’d just met his hero Takeru Kobayashi, a renowned competitive eater: “A middle-aged man, having laid out a small child’s fantasy—I’m gonna go meet the hot dog man and we’re gonna arm-wrestle and then we’ll be best friends forever—saw his fantasy granted, serving not to reinforce the fantasy’s essential absurdity, but to imbue it with the force of a higher calling. Destiny and all that. Karma.”

Fagone was gone for fifteen minutes, and when he finally returned the blood stains on his neck and face were still there—he hadn’t washed the blood off. We walked in circles around the campus of Swarthmore College. Twenty-five minutes of sighing empty words. He talked about the new book for a while, but reminded me I could find everything he’s talked about online. With each question I asked, he grew more impatient, more bored. Eventually, he mumbled something about having a daughter and how his wife is a software designer so he really, really needed to go, but thank you for reading his work, then paced off like

I understand why I was afraid, I just wish I had had more belief in it — but it’s a scary thing, at first. As long as you can stay curious and keep looking for that idea that will open into a book, you have a good chance of finding it.

JASON FAGONE

a sped-up clock. Within minutes he was back on Twitter.

It was a 40-minute Uber ride back to my friend Parker’s place in Philly. Parker and I hadn’t seen each other in eight years. He took me to El Bar, a cozy dive under the elevated rail. The commotion was constant, karaoke and shots, and it wasn’t until about midnight that I caught a glimpse outside. Galvanic white flurried down. I rushed past the doorman, PBR in hand. The snowfall had subdued the streets and the cars. All at once, snow streamed down, streaming down so much and so quickly that it made a soft clap as it landed.

Later that night, as I lay in the dark on the couch, snowlight pouring in, under the steeple shadow of Christ Church—Benjamin Franklin snug in his tomb—I thought about the interview, thought, was Jason Fagone an asshole? At times, he was charming, he even brought a copy of *Ingenious*. But, he showed up for lunch a few blocks from his house then talked for an hour and expected that to be enough. As if, in that hour, he’d given me plenty of material to write a good feature. Was his brilliance so profound I only needed a lunchtime chat with the man? Meanwhile, he has demanded far more of the people in his stories, only to expose their shortcomings. Or maybe he assumed I had to write a bloodless fluff piece and I wouldn’t call him out. And why hadn’t he washed off the blood stains while he was in the bathroom? Despite my confusion, I didn’t leave with a sense of mystery about Fagone, just a suspicion that he’d rather have spent that time on Twitter.

Overnight, the snow capped Philadelphia. Gazing out the window the next morning, I saw a whitescape. As I gathered my things, metallic dryness hit my mouth: I’d left my debit card at the Tavern in Swarthmore. Trains were canceled. I had no money. I said goodbye to Parker, handed him Fagone’s *Ingenious*. “Jason Fajjone? He’s the guy you interviewed?” raising his arm, “real tall? Kind of awkward?” That’s him. “We used to work at the same co-working space.”

The blizzarding snow kept a steady down-spun tilt, as I fought sidewalk down Market St., lugging my pale-blue 50’s era suitcase and my swollen backpack. I’d lost my watch, my hat, and my debit card. I had \$2.50 in cash, and fifteen bucks on a Christmas giftcard. At some point, my phone died. Snow belted down like chipped paint from the ice of a vaulted sky. Bullish machinery sludged along piles of snow with giant plows. With every step, I fought the wind and its treacheries. Bitter ice wind, fangs and needles of a bastardly wind. In search of a Wells Fargo. Closed: Too much snow. They even locked the Liberty Bell. I cringed worse than I shivered: I would have to go back to Swarthmore. I hid beneath my green snowcoat. Eventually I found an Uber. The driver, a middle-aged man wearing a beret, leaned across the passenger seat and opened the door, letting out warmth and Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons*: “Beautiful fuckin’ day, eh?”

No es fácil decir adiós

It's not easy to say goodbye

Luissana Cardenas was a television reporter in Venezuela before fleeing the political persecution of the media there. This is her open letter to her estranged country.

Note: Venezuela has been in a social, political and economic crisis for the last 18 years under the leftist movement established by Hugo Chávez Frias. From the beginning the government created a division of political parties into the "opposition" and the "chavismo." After Hugo Chávez Frias died of cancer in 2013, his successor, Nicolas Maduro, came to power and continued Chávez's oppressive policies, including trying to shut down the free media. As a result, the economy has deteriorated. Inflation in Venezuela is considered one of the highest in the world. The shortage of food and medicines has increased by 80%. Venezuelans go out into the streets to find food from the garbage to feed their families. More than 28 children die daily from malnutrition and other diseases. Social support for the government has ceased. Today, millions of Venezuelans are begging for change. In the last two years protests around the country have been massive, with more than 5,000 registered incidents of dead, wounded, persecuted and imprisoned politicians. Venezuelans are calling for presidential elections this year; however, Nicolas Maduro said he will not give in to such a request because elections are scheduled for 2018, in which he said he will be victorious.



Divagando en el recuerdo de mi tierra amada; aquella que me vio crecer, hice un encuentro con la nostalgia. Nostalgia, que poco a poco se ha apoderado de mis días haciendome sentir de cierto modo vacía. Dicen que el tiempo te enseña a vivir con ella y cuando menos lo esperas...se desvanece. Pero...a veces no depende de el tiempo. Cuando tu tierra te ha dado todo, cuando te ha enseñado a crecer, querido amigo me cuesta entender porque mi tierra ya no es lo que fue.

Vivo en la constante agonía de sentirme vacía porque no te he podido volver a ver. Por eso hoy...mi hermano venezolano, he decidido contarte mi historia.



Dear brother and sister,
Today I want to talk with you from the depths of my

being. Today I want to tell you what may be silenced one day. My name is Luissana Cardenas. I was born and raised for 26 years of my life in the country of the cool people, opportunities and dreams -- in my country, Venezuela. Growing up there, I never traveled abroad. There was no need. I didn't even go all over Venezuela. But where I went made me a happy girl with a perfect childhood. My father, my mother, my older and younger brothers were the perfect match for a happy life. No matter where we went, no matter what we had, whenever we could be together, in our country, was fair enough.



There is no Christmas in the world like a Venezuelan Christmas. It is one of the most colorful in Latin America and the whole world. A Venezuelan Christmas starts on December 21st and ends on New Year's night. It's a whole month of celebrations and fireworks -- a whole month where everyone is happy.

Education in Venezuela was demanding but accessible to all. Being a professional in Venezuela, was not an option, it was a duty.

Eating three times per day was never a concern. The food...how I miss Venezuelan food -- always authentic, fresh, varied and with an unforgettable flavor. If you ask me the recipe, I think there is no other word describing it better

THE POWER OF WORDS

than “love.”

Love for what you do, love for your land, your people, your sunsets, your beaches, the taste of the arepa in the morning, the Venezuelan folklore, the llanera music, the beautiful people of my land. The love for that land that was once full of hope.

But Venezuela can't live much longer with so much pain; it doesn't want to cry anymore, it doesn't want to miss anymore. My land just wants reconciliation.

Almost five years ago I decided to leave -- to leave everything that made me who I am, to leave everything I knew -- for an uncertain future.

It is not easy to say goodbye. It is not easy to stay either. It is not easy to be absent. It is not easy, neither in Venezuela nor abroad.

The absence is the sacrifice and the distance is the challenge. It's a challenge that millions of Venezuelans have conquered by leaving their country. Although saying goodbye seems simple, it contains many emotions.

Living away from your family is the big challenge when you leave your country. But dear brother and sister, let me tell you something: it is not the most difficult. Starting over puts you on a never-ending roller coaster of emotions.

Although many Venezuelans think that you actually live better outside Venezuela, let me tell you that it's not necessarily true.

It's not a coward who decides to leave, neither is the one who stays. Every one of us as Venezuelans are responsible for our own decisions no matter how misunderstood we are. There is no wrong or right decision. So don't judge me for leaving my country.

Do you remember when we were “the country with the opportunities”? Where everybody was free to think and do whatever we wanted? What happened with that?

We have forgotten those principles. We are all agreeing that what Venezuela is going through is not necessarily our fault. But, brother and sister, if we want our world changed we have to start with us. Where are our helping hands, our words of encouragement, our compassion, our mutual respect and understanding?

We have to begin to understand ourselves as Venezuelans, to understand that every situation and life is different. If your friend or your neighbor does not like or think the same as you, it does not mean that he is wrong. It just means that he thinks differently. Thinking differently is not bad, my people. We must learn to respect ourselves.

Five years ago, I decided to leave with only a suitcase loaded with dreams, illusions, and hopes. I decided to move to Dallas, Texas to complete my journalism studies because I had a dream to return to Venezuela, to continue to spread the word of what is going on there.

My first year away was very tough and depression was my constant companion. I needed the noise of the cars, the subway, the press conferences, the protests, the sound of the ice cream car around my neighborhood, the weather and every other single detail, even the worst. How absurd to miss those kind of things, right? The truth is that it was like waking from a dream that I never lived. So I decided to return to Venezuela. But returning was worse. Venezuela, that beautiful land that I missed every day I was gone, was just the shadow of what I left just eight months before.

Still, I dedicated myself to reach out to every Venezuelan, to give them a voice to be heard. I walked the streets

of our country with a microphone and a camera, without a bulletproof vest. I refused to take sides, but always to be in the middle. I was with Venezuela, not with Chávez or the opposition. I dreamed of a country with no divisions, just Venezuelan people.

I suffered insults, robbery and attacks as a journalist and as a Venezuelan. My father and brother were kidnapped and friends died. Almost all my friends had to leave. I did not want to leave. I wanted to stay and fight. But the chance to get away, though risky, came to me.

So I came here to Texas, always to prepare to return. It has not been easy at all. There have been physical and emotional pains, fears, rages and impotence. How many times I wanted to give up. How many times I have eaten once per day. How many times I ran out of money. How many times I have cried. How many times I have wondered what I'm doing here. But I came from the land of the Liberator of America -- in my blood there is a fighting spirit which will not let me give up despite how much I want it. But believe me, my friend, believing is easier than doing.

Starting again is very scary. Learning a new language, a new culture, eating different, smelling different. Everything is different. But it is neither better nor worse than where I came from. It's just different.

I was always happy in Venezuela. Living away from there does not make me less Venezuelan. It does not make me any less a part of you. I love my country and will never stop. But I want to tell you, brother and sister, that although I'm here I can't stop loving you.

Do not judge me; do not point me out as a coward, as not a real Venezuelan. The Venezuelan people that I remember are not like that, and I don't want to change my feelings about you. You can take me out of my country, but Venezuela never went out of me.

Sometimes I want to wake up and go back to that happy childhood in my land of opportunities. Then I realize that that land is gone, vanished in the wind of politics and civil war. Today we have forgotten that country that no longer exists. Venezuela will not be the same as before, but it can and will still be different than what it is today.

Brother and sister, our country is going to change -- I do not question it. Believe me that change will not come only from a change in government, but it will come from us.

If I could be there with you, believe me I would. But each one of us has a role in this story that we must follow. I am absent but still present, hurting yet hoping like you. I will always be one of you. A Venezuelan.



Story by Luissana Cardenas
Photos by Juan Barreto

A man with a beard and a brown hat sits at a wooden table in a room with green walls. The walls are covered with numerous framed photographs and documents. A warm, glowing lamp hangs above the table. The man is looking off to the side with a thoughtful expression. The overall atmosphere is cozy and artistic.

making the cut

**Wright Thompson
wrestles with finding
balance and himself,
but comes out on top
at ESPN**

Story by Amanda Talbot -- Photos courtesy of Wright Thompson

How about tuesday nite in miami? Wright Thompson texted me. I immediately booked a flight.

And there I was a few days later, walking along Calle Ocho, a sea of accents, class contrast and biting humidity. Occasional mild breezes stir the palms and swirl through the thronging masses, fleeting zephyrs offering brief respites from the oppressive heat.

I catch my breath and orient myself on the bustling street in Little Havana, spotting Ball & Chain's sign. I stroll inside, lively Latin music greeting my ears. It looks like something out of a 1930's movie set, with black and white photographs lining the dark green painted walls, the whole place under an amber glow. And there, inside this iconic bar, sits ESPN senior writer and Mississippi native Wright Thompson with daiquiri in hand.

Dallas meets Oxford in Miami.

Wright gets up from the wooden booth to greet me with a wide smile. He is unbelievably happy and shakes my hand. It feels like I'm catching up with an old friend as we sit down and he excitedly fills me in of his latest interview – Pat Riley.

I caught him at a good time.

As Wright grins and recounts stories of his times with Riley, even a naïve, twenty-four year old grad student could see why ESPN hired him. Heck, it seemed obvious just reading his longform pieces of world renowned athletes, coaches and such.

But meeting Wright face-to-face revealed a much deeper, personal picture of one of America's best sportswriters. One which caused me to wonder: What grounds and drives this man and how did he get here? I hadn't yet fully realized the struggles, sacrifices and many disappointments Wright faced to get and stay at ESPN.



A month later, back in Texas, I heard of the ESPN layoffs:

Opposite page: Wright Thompson sits in a booth at Ball and Chain in Miami. (Photo by Amanda Talbot)
Below: Wright and Sonia Thompson



Dynamic change demands an increased focus on versatility and value, and as a result, we have been engaged in the challenging process of determining the talent—anchors, analysts, reporters, writers and those who handle play-by-play—necessary to meet those demands. -- ESPN President John Skipper

I scanned through the long list of notable sports writers, anchors and analysts who had just been axed, hoping I would not find his name. No sign of him. A sigh of relief and a quick text to Wright confirms it. He's safe.

Did he know about the upcoming layoffs when we met? In retrospect, I wondered how he survived the deep cuts in ESPN's talent pool.

Back in Little Havana, someone walks up to the booth and snaps a photograph of Wright, or of the booth -- I'm unsure. I straighten my posture, remembering the cachet of the writer in front of me.

Wright is honest and upfront, albeit a tad distracted. His witty sense of humor makes up for his locker-room vocabulary. America's storied sportswriter swears like a sailor.

His dark brown eyes light up when he discusses something he deeply cares about. In this moment, in Little Havana, that care is Pat Riley. Wright fixates on the story currently materializing. *Nothing* else matters. Perhaps it's this all consuming focus that would keep him safe through ESPN's purge. Or maybe it's his likeable personality and work ethic that ESPN will continue to depend on to write stories like Riley's and of sport's most difficult and elusive subjects.

Wright is a grinder. A successful one at that.

"I'm really motivated by not letting people down. There's nothing in the world more terrifying than proving yourself unworthy of someone's trust. I've always been a people pleaser, the barking seal—look at me, look at me, look at me. "

Wright keeps his cell on the table. The same cell phone that holds a tight flight schedule, Bruce Springsteen songs, old family photos and a heartfelt letter from his late father.

Wright tells me to keep going as he texts Riley back. He's nearing the end of his Riley story and tonight he celebrates. He orders another daiquiri and asks the waiter that it not be as sweet this time. The waiter apologizes, explaining he has a new bartender. Wright's response is laid back and carefree. He's not rattled. In fact he's reflective.

Reflective, present Wright isn't his norm, he confesses in his low, authoritative, southern drawl. He doesn't balance life and work well. Nor does he sit well between stories -- he becomes restless.



Above: Wright and Sonia on a fishing trip at Gaston's in Arkansas.

The story itself and the joy of doing it well is his motivator. A costly one at that.

"If I'm focused on something, I'm unbelievably selfish. I'll get a text message from a person I actually care about and won't write 'em back. Like when I'm in the thing, I'm in the thing, at the expense of lots of other stuff. And that's a stupid, terrible way to be."

Taken aback by his blunt honesty, I ask if he is actively doing anything to change.

"No. I mean, I should. These aren't conscious decisions, it's just reactive, in the moment. The only thing in the world that matters is the story. It's like *G.I. Joe*, 'knowing is half the battle'. Self-awareness does not absolve being an asshole."

As the evening progresses and the music grows louder, I nervously rattle off questions and check the recorder every few minutes to ensure it is still on – clearly paranoid about losing the interview before I get it. Wright graciously tells me to take my time and gives me writing tips as we go.

"I'll sit here and answer these all night."

As we chat about his previous interviews with Michael Jordan, Johnny Manziel, Dan Gable and many others, I realize there's more to him than just "grinding." No one is great without an incredible work ethic -- true, but Wright has something more and it's starting to show.

He doesn't care if Pat Riley likes his story. Or if anyone else likes the story he writes. He cares about getting the story right and talking about real things. He doesn't work out, but he works. Hard. He is the most productive in the morning, and is typically

exhausted well before the sun goes down. He both stress-eats and forgets to eat. He is as nervous about the Pat Riley story as he was about the first story he wrote.

We find our way to El Rey de las Fritas, the Cuban diner Wright has been raving about, a spot he frequents whenever he is in Miami.

"There's only one thing to get; you want *frita*. It's a Cuban hamburger. The kids get them with cheese, but the old men think that's f---ing blasphemy. So, I get one of each."

"*Dos fritas y con queso. Y two cervezas presidentes*. Should've let you order since you're from Texas. Since everyone from Texas speaks Spanish." I can't help but smile. His humor is always on. A Spanish soap opera plays in the background and he tells me what is happening. My paltry Texas Spanish education is showing.

Between bites of *frita*, Wright asks me what I want to do for my career, listening with genuine interest and offering career advice. The conversation changes to the time he and Sonia, his wife, went to Paris for a European soccer tournament, how his favorite drink is bourbon, how he speaks to Riley in the same manner he would talk to his late father ("yes sir, no sir"), places I have to visit when I go to Rome this summer and how he is very superstitious—about everything. The last story he wrote in his old house was "Michael Jordan Has Not Left the Building." "The first story I wrote in my new house was maybe Dan Gable. But I was really relieved when it was good, because I thought, 'Okay, I broke the seal.'"

Amidst texts from his mom telling him that she got home safe and facts about his family, Wright mentions that he and Sonia have been trying to have a child for about four years now and in the next 21 days will do IVF. If he has a son, his name will be Walter Wright Thompson III.

"We've been trying, it's quite the thing."

Yet not a word about his father, a man who I'd read was a big presence in Wright's life. I wonder why he doesn't mention him. But the conversation turns to school.

Wright attended the University of Missouri, where everyone thought they would be the next big thing. Wright doesn't say it, but he has become the next big thing and it wasn't an easy road.

"I wouldn't want my undergrad self to know what it takes. 'Cause I'm not sure I'd be willing to do it again... You have to continue to believe in yourself despite all evidence that you shouldn't. I think there's a reason we're arrogant when we're young. It's because you have to be."

"You have to believe that if people tell you no, that you're right and they're wrong."

"There was an English class - 'Place as a Character in 19th Century American Literature.' That's basically my career. That was worth all that money my parents gave the University of Missouri." Place is king in Wright's writing. Every article he writes explains setting almost religiously until the reader feels, tastes and sees where the story unfolds. It was a long process of doing the same length of story over and over and over, and mastering form and word count, before Wright ever wrote a story for ESPN.

As we munch on *fritas* and sip cold *presidentes* on red swiveling barstools, I muster the courage to ask the question I've wanted to ask more than anything these past two hours. I want to know who is father was to him: Walter Wright Thompson Sr. A good father-son relationship can make a man. It can shape his desires and provide the encouragement needed to chase big dreams. The man that motivated Wright to be the person he is today. But, Walter Wright Thompson Sr. passed away from pancreatic cancer at just 58 years old. So I tread lightly.

"What about him?" he asks me. Oh gosh, I don't know how to respond, immediately regretting asking it. Fortunately, Wright continues. "We were very, very close and I still struggle very, very much."

Much of his grief comes from unanswered questions. When he gets real drunk, about twice a year, he wonders if his father would be proud of him. "So that remains a thing." Wright's father never had the chance to see his son become an immense success at ESPN and fulfill his writing dreams. He missed Wright's wedding and he will never meet his



Wright confers with Kansas City Star editor Mike Fannin.

future grandchildren. Disappointments which still affect Wright.

“It’s funny, because it’s something everyone goes through. So any self-pity or sort of problem dealing with it is f---ing pathetic. Every single person you ever see will deal with it, unless they die first. But, I struggle with it.”

It’s been thirteen years, but Wright hasn’t fully healed. His emotional fortitude seems to waver. I ask Wright how he deals with the loss.

“Just keep going. The cosmic injustice of it all. 58, pancreatic cancer, which is bad news. I sort of relied on him for a lot. Just like advice. My mom found this folder.” He tells me to hang on and grabs his cell.

Then he reads me the letter.

Dear Wright,

Momma told me you did not get the responses you wanted to hear about summer 2000’s internships. Don’t worry or fret too much. They had quotas to fill/political obligations/etc. The main thing is that one day, they will have wished they could have gotten to know you personally—to witness your talents, your drive, your personality. Hang in there.

“Ah,” Wright pauses, then finishes his daddy’s letter.

God has been good to you.

Recently, Wright’s mom found a folder while she was cleaning. In this folder are letters. Wright’s father made and kept copies of every letter he ever wrote Wright. It’s a good thing too, because “when you’re in college you don’t keep letters from your dad, you throw them away,” Wright tells me.

Walter Wright Thompson Sr. sent this letter to Wright after hearing of his crushing disappointment. Every single internship in America rejected him. Wright tells me that he applied literally everywhere after his sophomore year at Mizzou. None. No one wanted him. His father’s timeless words, decades later, ring true. But his father isn’t here to see them come to fruition.

This might be one of the things that grounds the man amongst the pressures and disappointments of his life: his father’s legacy and now his letters. My eyes fill with tears at the tender words. He nailed Wright. This is what I have been searching for in our time together and in my research of Wright’s previous works. Amongst the fascinating stories of trips to Rome, Tiger Woods’ issue with the spotlight and Johnny Manziel’s history in bars - this is Wright. There’s a reverence in the air when Wright mentions his father. I ask if not having his affirmation affects his writing.

“No, those things are totally separate. I know how to do my job. No, it’s just more like he’s never going to know his grandson or like life stuff. The

job thing is just the job thing. I know how to do that.”

“We were very, very close.”

After his junior year, Wright landed an internship at the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*. Most of the other interns partied, but Wright knew this might be his only shot and resolved not to blow it.

Wright described his *Kansas City Star* editor, Mike Fannin, as unrelenting. “He expected more of me than I thought I was capable of giving and it made me go do it. He and I were crazy in the same way, where it was all we cared about and so to find someone who we’re in a sort of series of one-upmanship, who could be more driven -- that was perfect for me at the time.”

Wright’s voice turns serious and contemplative as he recounts a flight to Cuba for a story for *Kansas City Star*. He listened to a lot of AC/DC while thinking of how this moment, this trip, this story, was a test.

“I was very well aware that the life that I had always wanted and said that I was capable of doing was going to do stories like that Cuba trip, which is essentially all my job is now. I was very well aware of the fact that that story was either going to be the thing that showed I could do it or the thing that exposed me as a fraud. If I can’t go down there and do this story then I’m not the real thing that I’ve always insisted that I am, even if I couldn’t convince other people.”

“And so the stakes in my own personal motivation and awareness of them could not have been higher to me. Maybe that’s silly in hindsight.”

Wright became a senior writer for ESPN about seven years later.

Wright moved to Oxford, Mississippi to live near his mom after his father’s death. His friend Eric Neel calls him the glue of his friendships, showing up across the country for the funeral of a woman he’s never met to be there for a mourning friend. But yet, friends and family must understand his line of work to stay close. Anyone who does not recognize that his work causes him to miss major events—like birthdays, parties, etc.—gets cut off. Storytelling is his life. It’s not an occasional freelance story; it is so consuming that he might ghost a friend for six months. With each story he feels he must prove himself anew, and the pressure weighs on him. Past success buys him nothing.

“I can’t have friends who don’t get it. And I can’t have friends who are keeping score. Why weren’t you at this? Why didn’t you get back? I can’t do it if you don’t get it. I can’t do the thing that needs to be maintained.”

And there's Sonia. Every time Wright leaves and comes back home for a story, it's an adjustment for he and his wife. "The struggle is that I come back. Re-entry is hard. Like you're gone, and then she gets used to it, and then I come back in and just leave my s--- everywhere. You come in and just leave your f---ing suitcase by the door. It's hard. So, just when she gets used to me not being there, I arrive and then just when she gets used to me being there, I leave."

"So I mean that's real. And I'm gone a lot. And I mean these stories that we're doing are essentially—they don't matter, but they matter a lot to me. So, I spent a lot of psychic energy, sometimes at the expense of everything else."

I ask about his family's religion -- maybe some sort of faith pushes him. Death has a way of bringing eternity and life beyond the present to the mind.

"My parents are both very religious. They're both Episcopalian." Wright tells me his mom really worries about him.

"I struggle. I'm wearing a St. Christopher medal. It's the Catholic patron saint of travelers. And the buffalo is this thing I got on an Indian reservation, on a road trip a couple months ago. It's my fertility good luck charm. I'll take it off when that thing plays itself out. But I don't know. I go back and forth. I mean I definitely..." he pauses for a long moment, "I believe there is a God."

His lack of certainty about God's existence seems to shake him. It's the first time during the whole interview that Wright looks uncomfortable. He turns his face away and tugs on his blue shirt, pulling it away from his neck. An uncomfortable, brief silence hits and I wait.

"I struggle with it. With the idea of God and a just God."

A just God. I wonder if this struggle comes from his father's untimely death. Wright continues, interrupting my thoughts, snapping me back to the conversation.

"No, I don't know. I sort of think I might. I've been to Catholic mass, in different cities, a couple times. I like the Catholic mass. I don't think churches should have f---ing people who smile and play the guitar. Like I hate that s---. Like "Jesus is great" [he sings]. Oh f--- you. Like I want like solemn and some organ. So, I like that a lot. Dude, I could totally end up being Catholic. I'm not really sure. I don't know."

I ask about Sonia.

"She is half Jewish, but really is a devote congregante of the house of gin...gin and cheese is serious business."

I burst out laughing in shock at this light joke in the midst of our serious conversation. Wright does this often. Throwing jokes around when life gets uncomfortable. It's a desirable character trait, because life is hard. His life is hard.

We climb into the nicest, high dollar Uber ride I've ever been in. Wright gazes out the window. He is weary from his Riley story. It's all he's done the past two months. As we pass a barbershop, he tells me he got a beard trim the other day in case I described his face.

"Didn't want to look like a Unabomber."

We pass Domino Park, where the old men play dominos in Little Havana. He tells me he knew Mike Mooney before he looked like Jesus. Then in the midst of our laughter and jokes, a deep revelation is shared in a soft, hushed voice as he stares out the window, while the Miami nightlife rushes by.

"All I ever really wanted was the adventure of it. To see the world and in other people learn something about yourself. That's the rush of it for me. Is getting to go places and so I want to make sure I'm in a place when I'm there."

We pass a motorcycle and the deep moment passes as quickly as it came.

"Sonia won't let me have a motorcycle. It seems fun." He crashed a bike in front of her once. It's no wonder she says no. He says that she puts up with a lot of his shenanigans.

"She's really remarkable. I'm sort of a much different, better



version of myself after having known her. It sort of unlocked something, I don't know. It's hard to describe. I'm just much calmer and I'm much more sort of comfortable in my own skin and secure and confident."

I ask how he improved her life and he jokes, "Oh, just totally ruined her life."

We both start laughing, hard.

Wright points out another building we drive by.

"So, this building right here on the right is where Pat and Chris Riley live. 800, it's the Apogee. They have the penthouse at the top floor... since 2008."

Wright steps out of the car and makes sure the driver knows the way to my hotel before shaking my hand and disappearing into the dark Miami night.



INFIELD

The enduring frisson of Michael Graff

Story by Kevin Ryan -- Photos by Logan Cyrus

Keeping his eyes on the road, Michael breaks the silence, “Look, I’m gonna show you who I am. And you write whatever you want. Don’t hold back. This is my life, this is who I am.” I nod, he nods. There are long stretches when neither of us is talking, when we just sit there like two old men watching baseball on TV. No chatter, no nerves, as he guides his truck along. We stare out at Charlotte, North Carolina, at the late afternoon, Friday, March 17, 2017, St. Patrick’s Day, the world ornamented green. The radio is on: NPR, pledge drive, begging for your money. Michael jokes that Trump’s budget cuts to Public Broadcasting will fuel donations. We turn into a shopping center, then web along for a spot. The parking lot is restless. “Here we are,” he walks toward a giant bouncy castle.

Kids sprint and leap all around the patio, some of them are shoeless.

Merciless savages fighting for reign of the inflatable stronghold. There are outdoor beer taps, Guinness and Smithwicks. We meet Michael’s friends. “We had lunch at Price’s Chicken Coop,” he says, with a cross-wise grin and a basso chuckle, his hazel beard floured lightly at the sides. Then he gets distracted, scouring through the crowd with oceanic eyes. He does this back and forth, staring off only to return to the conversation with information about the people around us, says a few things then recedes into observation—like he’s divided. They ask him where Laura is. She’s on her way. The patio is crowded, shoulder-to-shoulder, and now it’s the adults acting like savages. When he sees Laura, I recognize the look on Michael’s face, as if the crowd opens away from her into waves. Michael Graff is in love.

Michael and I ride back to his

and Laura’s place. He detours into some lavish neighborhood. Brief hills succumb to Colonial houses. Each street is lined with willow oaks, all planted in unison a century ago. The trees are getting old, Michael tells me. They’re banded at the waists like giraffes wearing diapers. And it’s only a matter of time before they collapse, in unison, all the same way, all the same age. But the way he says it—it doesn’t have to be sad. And a constant breeze whorls in through the open windows, loud and quick and everywhere at once.

He parks in front of their soft-yellow brick house. I tuck my suitcase into a corner of their guest bedroom, then we walk to a pizza place for dinner. Over Jalapeño IPAs, Michael talks about writing. When he’s interviewing someone for a profile, he likes to ride around with them, to get them in their car: “I want them to show me

stuff. Invariably they show me what they want to show me, and you can pick up a lot about a person by what he shows you." The restaurant is crowded, half-can-

Iwant to see what everybody's like when the show's not on. I try to get people in those situations. 'What are you like in the backroom?'

MICHAEL GRAFF

dlelit. "Every town has most of the same stuff—every town has a Walmart, every town has a hardware store, every town has a bar, but which of those things are you choosing to show me? Because that tells me what you do, where you go, and what you care about, so I want to know about that." He talks low and certain, each phrase collected. His sentences strung with natural poise. "If I'm going to write about a symphony I'd rather watch a symphony practice than perform in front of an audience. I want to see what everybody's like when the show's not on. I try to get people in those situations. 'What are you like in the backroom?'"



In Michael and Laura's living room, the record player looks like a shrine, and, in a way, it is. Next to it, a vase with yellow-tipped meadow flowers, a candle. Above it hang two concert posters, both held by string to a wooden plank at the top and the bottom. The one on the left shows a man in jeans and a red flannel shirt and burgundy shoes walking through a forest of turquoise and red, blue and grey and dark. He's lugging a guitar case, an axe propped on his shoulder. You get the impression he's strolling through a place where dark things linger, but he keeps walking, expressionless, good-postured. Each tree branch holds the shadow of birds.

SHOVELS & ROPE
 JANUARY 16, 2016 • Charleston Music Hall,
 in Charleston, South Carolina

The concert, Laura tells me, was their first date. She laughs as she reminisces. "A concert three hours away, overnight—it wasn't your average first date."

Michael smiles. "She told me that she had a friend in Charleston, and she might stay there. It was a hell of a conundrum for a guy trying to make a good impression but also not wanting to rent a \$400 room alone."

He reserved a room with two beds. The room was dingy, but that didn't matter. After the concert, they went back to the room together. They talked for hours, then slept in separate beds.

Van Morrison's *Moondance* comes on. We talk about
 20 *mayborn 2017*

language, about stories, about beauty, about love, about falling, about life. Laura, soft brown eyes, chestnut hair, natural smile, sits on the floor, facing Michael in the loveseat. She describes Michael's writing process. "When he's working on a story, it's so intense. On weekends if he's writing, a lot of times he'll work all day." There's a warmth to her voice. "He has this focus, I've learned to just let him write."

Everybody I spoke with described this state. "He has an incredible eye for detail," said Michael's younger brother Kenny. "He notices things most people don't. He's a good listener—he's always been like that."

The staff of *Charlotte Magazine*, where Michael serves as Editor, agree. "It's intimidating," says Kristen Wile, Senior Editor. "the way he thinks so carefully about everything he says and writes, and everything that comes out of his mouth is just pure brilliance." Arts Editor & Digital Editor Andy Smith: "It's more than just being observant, but being curious. And being genuinely interested. You can't write stories like those without being a good listener, being someone who understands narrative." Associate Editor Adam Rhew considers Michael the best editor he's worked with, and a good personal friend.



He has that quality. From the start, he's treated me like an equal, like a friend. As Van Morrison wails about the Mystic, Michael asks about my Maryland travels. What did I think about Kenny? I felt at ease around Kenny right away. No recorder, no notepad, just seafood and a couple beers. It was a blistering cold day. Patches of snow on the ground and the wind was violent. The restaurant was full of D.C elite. We were both out of place—it was lovely. When I told Kenny I'd never had crab cakes before, he said "Don't waste it here. Get them at Stoney's. They're as big as softballs." The next day, I did just that. Caricatures of birds run along the walls of Stoney's Kingfisher on Solomon's Island, Maryland, a village-sized oval of land surrounded by Chesapeake Bay and farmland. At night, looking up from the woods or the water or the docks, the sky is sobering. You witness the actual size of stars and say, "God."

I spent three-and-a-half days visiting many of the places that Michael has lived and written about. He grew up in Indi-



an Head, a secluded town on the Potomac River which sits at Mile 1 of Maryland Route 210, a quiet 45 minutes from Washington D.C by car. The town hall is attached to Panda Café. A pale blue water tower overlooks the town. Large birds wander above. The backroads are walled in by massive trees that rise 50 feet, maybe higher. Occasionally, fields appear. Behind a slim red-doored church, a sign says Maryland Airport, with decaying single-engine planes in the field, all looking toward a sign that reads “Learn to Fly Here.”

In an email, Michael mentioned that the house where he lived till he was 15 was on an unnamed dirt road in Chicamuxen, with no exact address. I trekked through those backwoods. And something drew me to one house in particular. I took a picture. When Michael sees the picture, he stops—lost in a gaze at the screen. That’s the house.

These days, it’s yellow, unsold, empty, perfectly attuned to the stillness of forest, a flattened T, with a circular driveway and a carport and a meadow of its own. Michael’s dad cleared the land with a Bush Hog. As a boy, Michael would wander around the woods, grab frogs in the creek. “The creek,” he says, “was an eternal playground for two boys.” He pauses. “Those are the things you don’t talk about—like the creek, you don’t talk about that when you’re an adult.” Some nights, he’ll dream about the creek. He’ll look around, and he’s down by the water.

Michael and Kenny used to rollerblade off the back deck to see who could remain flying the longest. They played baseball nonstop. One of them would pitch, the other would bat. If you sent the ball flying into the woods, it was a homerun. But if you hit a groundball into the woods, it was a live ball. You ran the bases while the fielder chased the ball, and you ran until the fielder threw the ball and yelled “Infield!” then you had to stop right where you were and go back to the previous base, but you were safe.

When Michael was 8, his dad built the 24’x24’ room at the back of the house. “Seeing this house reminds me of that time,” he huffs, amazed, giving a pulse to each word: “He. Could do. Everything.”

One morning before school, Michael walked into the shed and found him hanging upside down from the beam as he installed electricity. He looked at Michael, “I’m doing this so you don’t have to.”



It’s Saturday night, the day after St. Patrick’s Day, so the streets are empty. The three of us meet Kristen, Senior Editor at *Charlotte Magazine*, and her husband Jon. We talk journalism over wine and beers, surrounded by TVs, each with a different view of March Madness. After an hour, we walk to the bar next door – raucous, swarming. When the bartender sees Michael and Laura, he stops what he’s doing then weaves down the bar. I get a few moments alone with Kristen and Jon. Yes, they tell me, this is really who Michael is. “If you read his writing first,” Kristen says, “and you speak to him in person, the level of thought is exactly the same,”

a sentiment echoed by everyone I met. “He’s so quiet, so you never know what he’s thinking. And then as soon as he talks, it’s like, ‘Of course you were thinking that brilliant thought.’”

I mention that Michael told me he doesn’t enjoy the physical act of writing as much as the reporting. Kristen shakes her head, grinning. “He’s such a perceptive person that I could see him enjoying the information gathering. But I don’t believe that he doesn’t like writing, he’s too good. Everything he writes is just too good.” She laughs, “Even his e-mails are like beautiful prose.” Kristen looks at Jon, speaking softer. “Michael’s one flaw is that he doesn’t think enough about himself. He’s so willing to mentor and edit and sacrifice for the magazine that he needs to be a little more self-ish sometimes. He’s just such a wonderful person that I wish he would think more about himself.” After a pause, “And I wish he and Laura would get a rescue dog.”

We wind up at Reid’s Fine Foods in time to watch Nashville’s A Boy Named Banjo perform. Michael and Laura dance, they sing along with the crowd—“Take a load off, Fanny / take a load for free / Take a load off, Fanny / and you put the load right on me.” A few songs later, our Uber arrives, a shiny black Mercedes Benz C-Class, trunk loaded with subwoofers.

Back at home, Michael puts on Springsteen’s *Born to Run* and sings along with “Thunder Road.” Laura never had a record player growing up. Only a cd player, a hulking thing that had to hook into a boombox for speakers. “Tenth Avenue Freeze Out” roars through the speakers. Theirs is a house of music.

After a while, Laura goes to bed, and Michael talks about his dad. His eyes swell. “When you’re born, you can’t walk. Then you learn to walk, and you can live a life, then you fall back down again. You’re always constantly afraid of that fall—that last fall.”

Michael’s father, Fred Graff, had, unbeknownst to his family, been a prolific and adept skydiver. After Fred suffered his first stroke something opened up. He told Michael about his days as a skydiving bachelor. Michael wrote about it in the piece “Up and Away.” The story is special to him, like an old friend. Thinking about it, he grins, “If I get Alzheimer’s or have a stroke one day, that’ll be the one story I remember.”

It’s been 8 or 9 years since Fred had his first stroke. A few weeks ago, he fell. He hit his head. He’s been on the mend. “Here’s a guy that used to jump out of planes. And land. No problem. He could do everything. And the irony of the story is, here you are again, totally afraid to fall. That is his biggest fear in life: falling.” Sometimes, gripped to his walker, Fred will holler Michael’s name, he’ll start yelling, afraid he’s about to collapse. “Falling is his biggest fear and he used to do it three times a day sometimes.” He laughs at the weird absurdity of it all. “And that’s such a part of every story—it’s all of our stories. The idea of falling is the ultimate fear. We all spend our lives just trying not to fall. And then you have these people who jump out of planes on purpose. Maybe that’s the human desire to accomplish everything, even the fall.”

THE POWER OF WORDS

When he talks about skydiving, something undulates from Michael's eyes. He's transported, he's midair. Hurling down through an un-kissed sky. A drift of wirework azure. A boundlessness you fall through, eyes closed, you fall through—then open your eyes, with the world spread below you, engulfed by the silent hurtle. The quiet is absolute. You don't plummet, you freefall. You spread across pacific white, until you land into the lives below.



For the first part of Sunday morning, Michael, in his grey Appalachian State long-sleeve, reads *The New York Times* while Laura reads *The Charlotte Observer*, then they trade. The Brian Fallon record is still on the record player from last night.

I slouch into a chair on the front porch, adrift in thought. I spent time with Michael Graff and he showed me his life. And his life, his story, is filled with optimism and people and words. He's guided by music, by love, by family. And he disproves the cliché of a talented writer as self-destructive fallen angel. You don't have to be miserable or unpleasant to be successful. How Michael treats people, how he sees the world: This is how a person should live.

After a while, Michael peeks out

the front door. "Laura," with a smile, "there's an Irishman on our porch." He walks out to the truck, carrying an empty ice chest, loads it into the truck-bed next to his bluefade Nishiky Manitoba and an old chair he's been trying to get rid of for weeks. Behind him, the red vibrance of a sprawling tree with blood-orange leaves. All the other trees are green or bare. He latches the tailgate. "I'll fill that cooler up with seafood, mostly crabs and oysters. The crabs are coming in earlier than ever before." He shakes his head as he starts the truck. It's quiet. He turns the truck toward downtown. "I don't understand how people can defend the idea that it doesn't exist, that the world isn't getting warmer: The crabs are literally coming in earlier than ever before."

I say something about the birds who eat plastic from the ocean because they think it's food, but stop in time to spare us the depressing conclusion. Near the center of the city, the crossroads at Tyron and Trade, music gets louder. A man hacks at a pearl Stratocaster till jazz-funk bleeds into the street.

Every time Michael has driven me around Charlotte, a calm seriousness overtakes the air, but this time is the most serious yet. It feels oddly meditative, urgent. Only I'm distracted. I keep thinking about last night. I

close my eyes, and we're all there again: We're in one of those cars, the kind with a trunk so full of subwoofers that it sinks in the back and the windows rattle and people stare and you can't hear a thing because the bass is so powerful. The road unfurls into the black Mercedes Benz C-Class. "Used to This" surrounds us, rattling the windows—the roof throbs and the air shakes like something you could touch. An aftermath of rain sheens the asphalt, vanishing under the car as it blurs along Sharon Road, past CEOs' palatial houses and NASCAR heroes' mansions. Without warning, the car slows for a speed bump, and the driver groans, "These things, always slowing me down," then hurls the car back into flight.

Who knows how fast we're going. The dashboard flashes 10:01 p.m. Windows open, the perfume of mown young grass wavers damp air. Charlotte out the window, trees banded at the waists. This is the kind of moment you close your eyes into for keepsake. Each carrelbound star blesses down on Charlotte. In the backseat, Laura is smiling, she's laughing at something Michael just said. They lean into each other like two familiar birds.





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Clean on the other side

Story by Rita Wilson Unogwu -- Photos courtesy of Katherine Boo

“I’m often dismayed by mystique-driven representations of reporting as some precise and teleological mission, when in the doing it can be an uncertain, messy and deeply conflicted process.”

As she sunk in, stomach deep in sewage, a sandal lost and all sorts of fetid foulness covering her skin, she raised her hand to protect her camera. Katherine Boo stumbled into this putrid pit while investigating the death of a local boy—Kalil—which the police covered up as a tuberculosis case. A kind man helped find her shoe. A charitable woman helped clean off the nauseating slime covering her. Afterward, Boo wobbly retreated to a nearby restroom to wash off. Her day of reporting in Annawadi, a slum near India’s Mumbai airport, had ended. The camera survived.

Boo’s skin was tinged blue for several days, a memento of “the awkwardness and un-coolness and absurdity inherent” in her kind of reporting. As if that wasn’t enough, her video editor informed her that the fall was all on tape. Not that Boo has ever gone back to watch it. And though she chorled through this remembrance, she confessed to it as being a mortifying

I feel if we don’t take time in reporting, it seems we are going out to to get the money quote, and I think if you apply better quality of listening to people, you get a better deeper understanding, and this is a world that is fast paced.

KATHERINE BOO

experience.

Ever the journalist, Boo began our telephone interview by interviewing me: “How are you doing? What are you up to? What are your plans after school?” and “Oh, I know what you are talking about,” referring to the struggles of international students like me. I got the “once a journalist, always one” first impression, and I had to remind myself that I owned the interview.

“Before I met him my world was small.”

Prior to meeting Sunil Khilnani, her husband, Katherine covered stories of low-income communities in Washington, D.C., where she was born. Her world only expanded when she went to The New Yorker, traveling around the U.S., until Khilnani—a politics professor and a scholar of Indian history—paved the way for her to test her investigative reporting skills in India.

“When I was young, an unhappily married woman—a writer whose husband didn’t respect her work—advised me to find a partner who made me laugh, accepted me as an intellectual equal and never bored me. That I found that and more in Sunil still seems a bit miraculous to me.”

Khilnani describes Katherine as “having a sharpness and ferocity of attention that can be disconcerting” with which he believes she was born. “This baby of mine is intense,” her mother

wrote to her sister when Boo was 20 months old.

Her first book, 2012’s *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life, Death and Hope in a Mumbai Undercity*, won the National Book Award for nonfiction. The book also won nonfiction prizes from PEN, the Los Angeles Times Book Awards, the New York Public Library and the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

“My mother was very poor and her experience influenced me greatly.”

Boo dislikes when low income people are marginalized in stories, denying them “dimensionality.”

She did not start out as a journalist but decided to pursue journalism in the hope that “if more people understood the level upon levels of injustice heaped onto people who lack assets and power, they might do more to redress them.”

Her hope for change is similar to that of Sunil, a subject in her book. Sunil was repeatedly beaten brutally by an officer but did not hide it in fear of reprisal, as many of the slum dwellers did. He went to Katherine with the name of the police officer so it could be part of her story. “The name of the officer was in Marathi—it wasn’t even in his own Hindi language. He knew that the beatings would keep happening if not documented. His hope was the hope that I had, that if you document it, there is no guarantee that justice will be done, but there is a better chance, a slightly better chance that people who do these things will be held accountable.” Perhaps, the hope of a beautiful forever.

Khilnani confirms that Katherine gets angry about “injustice in its immediacy” and she believes that reporting fact “is the best way to honor the people she writes about.” She uses the real names of the people she writes about.

“I agonized about this decision a lot. It’s been my choice over my career to use people’s real names with their permission; and one of the reasons that I choose that is that there’s been a lot of dishonest reporting in the history of journalism on low income people, and part of the problem is when you change names and details, there is no accountability for what people write.”

Boo accepts that journalists cannot control all the consequences that result from their work but suggests they remain present after reporting to make sure subjects are not the target of the police. Which is why she stayed in Annawadi after her book was published. With a shaky voice and long pauses, she recollected one of her



Katherine Boo works with children in an Annawadi slum. (Photo by Jordan Tierney)

most emotional struggles after a day of reporting at Annawadi, when the police started retaliating. Making a choice to report was one thing, but putting people in danger was another.

The Self-Made Philosopher

The center of Katherine's Annawadi revelation is Abdul. His philosophies, which motivated him to hustle everyday, turned out to be life lessons for Katherine. In one of his moments of wisdom, Katherine introduced her readers to his wit:

"Water and ice were made of the same thing. He thought most people were made of the same thing, too. He himself was probably little different, constitutionally, from the cynical, corrupt people around him—the police officers and the special executive officer and the morgue doctor who fixed Kalu's death. If he had to sort all humanity by its material essence, he thought he would probably end up with a single gigantic pile. But here was the interesting thing. Ice was distinct from—and in his view, better than—what it was made of."

Abdul seldom spoke but had great insights when he did speak. Once in the book, a woman had tried to hang herself and the thinking Abdul began yet another insightful speech:

"Do you ever think, when you look at someone, when you listen to someone, does that person really have a life?" Abdul was asking the boy who was not listening..."Like that woman who just went to hang herself, or her husband, who probably beat her before she did this? I wonder what kind of life is that," Abdul went on. "I go through tensions just to see it. But it is a life. Even the person who lives like a dog still has a kind of life. Once when my mother was

beating me, and that thought came to me. I said, 'If what is happening now, you beating me, is to keep happening for the rest of my life, it would be a bad life, but it would be a life, too.'"

This is the kind of beauty Boo finds in communities many people think have nothing to offer. On ordinary days, Katherine says, "you get these insights to live in your own life later." The impact of these insights are seen whenever she mentions them in her interviews.

Person in a writer

Boo is a conversationalist. She also wants to know that you are listening, that you can contribute to the gist. I cannot count how many times she mentioned my name while we talked. One such time she inquired, "I mean, how can we even understand, Rita, what our history is if we are not properly chronicling

what's happening in the lower 20 percent?" Another time she retorted, "Oh Rita, that is an intentional question."

Happiness for Boo is when people are able to progress from bad situations. On one of her good days reporting in Annawadi, people were making more money because the global market increased the price of scrap, thanks to the Olympics in Beijing. Though not sure if writing about the lower 20 percent will bring significant change, she is certain that not writing will bring no change at all.

Boo is a night owl. After the interview, we would email each other back and forth into the night. It was 1:30 a.m. in D.C. and ding brings email notifications from Boo answering my follow-up questions or giving me clarifications. At 1:00 a.m. on another day, ding is Boo confessing to reading my digital portfolio.

The Positivist

It is important to Boo to not be blinded by social problems to the point of forgetting the good and beautiful things in the world. Even amongst the poor. Like the friendship between Sunil and Sonu the Blinky boy, the insights from Abdul and how the Hussein family (where Abdul is the oldest son) laughed and lived together despite their impoverished living conditions.

Her interest in people comes naturally, so who else is better fit to tell an unbiased story of low-income people and open minds up to the reasons why people like these are in such situations?

She finds pleasure in watching things grow, like seeds in dirt. She also enjoys spending time with her siblings and extended family, interactions that have helped hone her skills as a writer. But above all these is being with her husband.

"I'm not an adrenaline junky"

When people risk all to describe their lives, Boo says, the reporter must be all in. That being said, Boo also believes in taking time off from reporting before going back into the field. "Sometimes the reporting is really painful and really distressing; and after I finish a project, I don't want just to report on something. I want to engage in something [else that's] constructive. I'm not an adrenaline junky—I need my time away from reporting before I go back in."

While on a project, she commits. At the end of it, she delves into something not journalism-related, like teaching kids, engaging in community work, or reading fiction, non-fiction and poetry. Boo is always seeking to hone her writing, looking

How can we even understand what our history is if we are not properly chronicling what's happening in the lower 20%?

KATHERINE BOO

WHAT'S NEXT?

Katherine is currently working on two long-term projects. Her primary focus for 2017 is the underground means of social mobility in low income American communities. Katherine knows that not everybody stays in poverty. She wants to know why and how people progress from it. This project involves families whose lives she has been documenting for 25 years.

DID YOU KNOW?

When Katherine started reporting at Annawadi she taught some of the young people how to use her camera. She'd let them go wherever they would and record their own stories. For her, that was a way of getting to know what mattered to them. It was her way of not imposing on them what she thought should they should worry about.

One such video was made by a 15-year-old boy who was worried about the toxic nature of the water. He pretended to be a Marathi news reporter and "shot the sewage lake in forensic detail." The teenager referred to it as "our garbage water that brings sickness and death."

POST SEWAGE FALL

After Katherine's fall, it became something for the people of Annawadi to laugh about, including Katherine. One Annawadian said of Katherine, "this one gets so focused on her recording that she will fall right into the shit."

THE POWER OF WORDS

Self Control



Story and Photos by Jesika Fisher

WE BINGE ON THE MANY FACETS OF SARAH HEPOLA

I wait for Sarah, listening to the muted sounds of traffic rushing past the window over the strums of indie rock from the ceiling speakers. We're meeting at Houndstooth, a coffeehouse with an industrial-meets-hipster feel...aka the style du jour for most eating establishments. The tables are pale blonde wood, with their brightly painted turquoise legs providing a stark contrast. The accent wall begin the counter is brushed metal, the other exposed brick. They serve malted matcha that has an "oatmeal" like taste, roasted coffee, and microbrew IPAs.

The chairs are barstools with no seat backs, as if they don't want people to stay awhile. Still, that doesn't stop the businessmen and college students hunched over their laptops for hours on end. It won't stop us either.

The front door opens, and Sarah walks in. She's wearing a maroon and teal paisley dress that skims her knees. Over it, she has a denim jacket and three-inch beige shoes with wooden wedge heels that she seems used to moving in.

Her hair is the color of wheat and just as straight, cut in layers that come to just above her shoulders. Her eyes are the same shade of cornflower blue as her jacket. She surveys the room, carrying an oversized purse that reminds me more of a tote bag. The entire outfit is calculated casual. She fits right in.

When we make our introductions, she greets me with a smile, friendly and polite, yet with an underlying hint of a smirk that seems to come naturally. I had only seen Sarah before in the pictures on her web site, parts of her pieced together from different eras of her life: the child with her proud school picture grin, the angsty preteen, the high schooler, dazed and drunken smiles, and the young woman with muddled, dyed red hair and a defiant glare.

Sarah Hepola's personal memoir, *Blackout*, talks about experiences as an alcoholic prone to blackouts, and her recovery, helping others who are in the place she used to be. Her writing incorporates a matter-of-fact, and often self-deprecating kind of wit. For Sarah, humor means many things: a way to get people's attention, a means of expression,

self defense, and a tool to be used wisely.

"They say you can experience life as a tragedy, or you can experience it as a comedy."

When Sarah was fifteen, she discovered that comedy was a much better way to experience the world. She wanted to be like her first boyfriend, Miles (an alias she gave in the book), who was the funniest person she knew. By learning his tricks, she discovered that she could easily get away with a lot more by making someone laugh.

As she grew older, Sarah continued to copy the people around her, especially at her first job at the *Austin Chronicle*, and later at the *Dallas Observer*. Humor was a way to bond with her coworkers, bringing everyone closer together as they dealt with the annoyances of the world.

Still, she struggles with being close to people, and often finds her shyness, as well as trying to figure out what the heck to say, holds her back. Writing takes some of that shyness away. It gives her a reason to talk to people, which was what alcohol used to do as well.

She's ordered hibiscus tea. It's a bright, pinkish red, the color of her lipstick.

"[*Blackout*] was an attempt to integrate all parts of my personality. Because so much of drinking had been, 'Oh, this is all really funny!'"

She takes a sip of her tea, careful while holding the cup, but once it's safely on the table, her hands move like a symphony conductor.

"And then you wake up the next morning and you're like, 'Oh my God, this is a f----- disaster! It's miserable. I'm in f----- hell.'"

When she speaks, her words come out quickly, like she's trying to cram in as much as possible before the next question. Yet every response is thoughtful and well-crafted. Sarah seems used to living inside her own head, thinking and pondering all the time.

Reading Sarah's memoir gives a glimpse into decades drenched in beer and riddled with lost time, one night stands, and reckless behavior. She comes across differently now, but that's the whole point of being a chameleon: learning how to hide yourself. But instead of being invisible, Sarah's camouflage is acting like someone else, be it the people around her or another, bolder





version of herself. But there are many uniquely-Sarah parts to Hepola, as I'd come to discover.

After the interview, we agree to meet up a few days later for a photo-shoot for the magazine. Sarah suggests an antiques and vintage clothing store named Dolly Python, one of her favorite places to shop.

We're buried in the back part of the clothing section among the racks of kimonos, Kentucky Derby style feathered hats, gilded western jackets, and rows of cowboy boots. Above the racks are two Picasso-style paintings that take up nearly an entire wall dominated with red and punctuated by blues and yellows.

A fake skull with a candle stuck in a trepanation hole on top sits on a table with other knick knacks in front of a floor-to-ceiling length mirror next to the changing area. A tiny old dog with scruffy brown fur wanders the aisles, investigating the customers traipsing among its already strange environment.

Sarah loves the photobooth style shoot, using props to show different sides of her personality -- her own props. She explains that she likes to collect wigs, then quickly calls herself "weird" for doing so. Carrying in tote bags and piles of clothes, she looks perfectly at home here too.

The first facet of Sarah is simple: studious and smart. No wig, just her, adding only a pair of glasses. There's no change in the outfit she's wearing: a black shirt, grey pencil skirt, black tights, and fire engine red

They say you can experience life as a tragedy, or you can experience it as a comedy.

SARAH HEPOLA

knee high boots. Her brightly colored and immediately eye catching boots stay on the entire time, for every part of her.

She's holding *Roads* by Larry McMurtry, a book she's currently reading. But we find another book titled *Madame Sarah* and decide it's perfect. She gives another knowing, vaguely smirking smile, a challenge to the serious academic stereotype. Being the outlier seems to be her style, though she describes herself as being shy as a child and, even as an adult feels insecure and self-conscious.

Then it's Sarah the femme fatale, in a long, blonde wig that's the same color as her actual hair and a pair of sunglasses, evoking the idea of the dangerous, often uninhibited woman. But instead of a gun, Sarah's weapon is her oft-used witty, often deadpan humor.



The lights of the patrol car flash in Sarah's rearview mirror, painting the inside of her car in bright, rhythmic shades of red and blue. "What have you been doing tonight?" the police officer asks, peering into the rolled down car window. She had just left the Old Monk parking lot when he caught her. It's for a simple reason: no headlights, but Sarah knows she'll be in a lot more trouble if the police officer found out she was completely wasted. She has to think quickly, or risk potentially seeing the inside of a jail cell.

"Well, I'm going to be honest with you," Sarah tells the officer. "I was making out with a guy back there in the parking lot" (that was true).

The officer blinks at Sarah for a moment. His stern eyebrows quickly shift into raised ones as the tension melts away. He bursts into surprised laughter.

"I did not expect you to say that." In that moment she's no longer an enemy, because she had made him laugh. He lets her go without a tick-





et.

Sarah admits to humor being a dark power. “You have to be careful that you’re not using it as a smokescreen for either bad behavior or real vulnerability.” Something she’s all too familiar with, having been on both sides of that barrier. But it’s hard to put down your weapon when you’re so used to using it.

When I ask her what she would be if she wasn’t a writer or an editor, Sarah immediately proclaims that she wants to be a dolphin, because they look beautiful racing through the water. A moment later, she finally admits she would love to be a mother, calling it “a really powerful experience.” She’s yet to find the right partner for her to be in a relationship with, much less have a child.

Making connections is something Sarah’s trying to get comfortable with when it’s just her, uninfluenced by alcohol. After decades of drinking, she’s still on the road to recovery to an alcohol-free life, and what kind of person she is without it. If humor is her weapon, alcohol was her shield. She lived behind the shield for so long that just being herself has been a struggle.

I watch Sarah as she adjusts her new wig in the mirror. It’s ink black, cut into a short, blunt bob. We decide this facet is Sarah being French, like the curious and adventurous main character from the movie *Amelie*. Finding a Polaroid camera from the 1970s amongst the store’s antiques section, Sarah reminisces about using a similar one when she was younger.

Exploration has always been in her blood. She’s currently working on a book comprised of multiple essays about travelling alone, having quit her job at 26 to explore South America for four months. At 27, she drove across the United States for five months, occasionally sleeping in her car and living “on baked beans and peanut butter.” But Sarah is careful to point out that traveling alone probably isn’t going to “fix” anyone like Julia Roberts’ character in *Eat, Pray, Love*, but merely expand their experiences.

We wrap up the day with a few shots of just Sarah with the giant Ronald

McDonald head, using it to show Sarah’s humorous side: a painted mask, larger than life. She’s embraced her mask and the complexities that come with the various sides of her. Her conversational-style writing is also an extension of her that has been developed over time.

“I’ve always been a confessional writer and I think part of that was a form of control. I wanted you to see me in a certain way, so I was going to control the narrative.”

“And a lot of those stories in the early days were me trying to present myself in a certain way. It was a tightly controlled selfie with certain filters. I think I’ve loosened up a little bit and I understand that part of the art is allowing yourself to be seen without the filter.”

For so long that filter had been the amber-colored haze of alcohol. And though Sarah has been sober for a few years now, vestiges of her old life still linger.





It's 4:00 pm after the end of the week from hell. There are too many hours left before bed, and Sarah finds herself overwhelmed with the thought of nothing to do other than stress about being stressed. It's time for a "break the glass" emergency measure.

At 5'2", she has to pull a stool over to her kitchenette, then proceeds to scale her shaker-style, white kitchen cabinets like Mount Everest, towards the box of double chocolate cupcake mix she has stashed up on the very top shelf. Letting out a grunt of frustration, Sarah struggles to reach for the box and finally snatches it from the recesses with a bellow of triumph.

Before she knows it, she's stirring the bowl of batter, stopping to steal a spoonful.

Damn, that's good.

She steals another, then prepares the rest to be baked.

An hour later, Sarah doesn't notice that she has a dab of chocolate buttercream frosting just above her lip as she stands in her kitchen, staring at the trees as they billow in the breeze from the 2nd floor window of her carriage house apartment.

Four empty cupcake wrappers, each one a different color, are strewn across her black and white checkered kitchen table. She feels a mixture of foolishness and masochistic accomplishment as she grabs another cupcake. Even though she's full, she wants to eat every last one--and feels helpless to stop.

"I stopped drinking, but you can't just cut out eating. My struggle will be to learn a healthy relationship [with eating]. Some part of me seems to REFUSE a healthy relationship. I'm HELL BENT on binge."

All the cupcakes are gone. She immediately takes out the trash, and washes every dish. She doesn't want to see what she has done. It's a leftover ritual from her drinking days, the mountain of beer cans and cigarette butts replaced by a box of Duncan Hines and empty jars of peanut butter.

Sarah laughs helplessly as she sinks into herself, a look of guilt and regret flickering across her eyes. "This is not material. This is the struggle of my life. And it's not the adventure I wanted to tell."

Sarah wants many things. She wants to fall in love with a guy in California and drive into the sunset along Pacific Coast Highway. "I

don't want to tell the story where I'm on my cabinet, on my knees, trying to get the cupcake mix up on the top shelf."

She stops herself, letting out another sad, almost bitter laugh, before stammering from a dawning realization. "But...that's material. And it is the adventure of my life," she says softly.

"One of the adventures of my life will be to continue to confront and wrestle with my urge toward excess."

While she imagined *Blackout* to be read by women in their 30s and 40s, she's received a lot of feedback from young women in their 20s as well.

Another surprising audience has been young men, as well as those in their 30s and 40s who have had their lives slowly destroyed by alcohol. Another project she's working on will be an extension of *Blackout*, focusing on the concept of bingeing, especially regarding drinking on college campuses.

"When did college go from a place where we teach someone to be the best they can be to what one researcher has called 'a training ground for alcoholics?'"

She tries to help people who are going through what she's been through by giving talks, responding to them online and even going as far as to meet someone one on one. By reaching out and using her past to help people, it also helps bring her healing and a sense of meaning.

"I do it to keep myself alive, to keep myself from the pits of depression, looking for my meaning in a pint of Haagen Daz." She's quiet for a long time before finally speaking.

"I do it because it feels good."





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COMING HOME

A series of documentary films, two bestselling novels and a decade of war reporting sit in Sebastian Junger's rearview mirror. What's next for the writer who says he's finished with a critical piece of his career?

Story and photos by Angela Roe



As the sun begins to sleep outside the Cinopolis Chelsea theatre, Sebastian Junger waits for the opening night screening of his latest project.

Effortless New Yorkers aged 20-something to retirement scuffle into Theatre 9 for “Hell on Earth: The Fall of Syria and the Rise of ISIS” for a first look at Junger’s timely documentary on an endlessly complicated subject: what the West is to do, if anything, about dictators, civil war, refugees and brutal violence in Syria.

Air perfumed with booze and criminally overpriced popcorn, the two-week long TriBeCa Film Festival is coming to a close this weekend, with Junger’s last of the three “Hell on Earth” showings two days from tonight.

The film, co-directed by Nick Quested for *National Geographic*, is important but painful to watch, and a depressing prelude to the time I spend with Junger.

It had been a Herculean feat to get this close to him from the beginning. I pep talk my way into a smile before approaching him, standing by for his admirers to get their shot with him. Something about being breezy after a movie about ISIS doesn’t fit. The people-watching alone is worth

Experiencing trauma expands you personally... like having children expands you, or whatever. You understand humanity a little bit better when you're exposed to children.

SEBASTIAN JUNGER

the flight across the country, the artsy crowd peppered with film nerds overanalyzing what they’ve come to see on screen.

A red-headed girl in a cream lace dress gushes to Junger that as a journalism student, she’s inspired by his brave work. She proudly retrieves from her satchel a paperback copy of *The Perfect Storm*, Junger’s first novel and the precursor to the George Clooney blockbuster, for her literary idol to sign. Graciously nodding along and smiling, Junger agrees to take a photo with her, which she immediately scrutinizes on her phone while trailing off with a friend. A line of 15 or so forms, and Junger shakes each hand, thanking people for coming out. One man asks for an autograph on his copy of *Tribe*, Junger’s 2016 New York Times bestseller.

Only a few feet away, I’m secretly delighted that I’ve brought a different book for Junger to sign—a fresh copy of the quintessential Junger—*War*.

I introduce myself after the last of the attendees has sauntered away. A firm handshake. An apology. “I’m sorry, can you wait here just a minute?” Junger tells a group of friends goodbye, including his co-director, Quested. Less than a minute later, we’re back. I scan the room briefly for a place to sit. Nothing. Leave it to movie theatre lobbies to include a bar but no chairs. I awkwardly juggle my purse,

notebook full of questions, camera and recorder. The best we can do is find a space leaning up against the wall.

Junger, dressed in a dark grey v-neck t-shirt, dark wash denim and sensible brown boots, stares at me. His expression doesn’t reveal expectation. In fact, it doesn’t reveal much of anything.



Six weeks prior to our live meeting, Junger is jolly.

I can’t tell if this is his normal phone etiquette, but something tells me he’s different today, this Saturday morning in March. (My Internet research in preparation for the interview painted a sterner picture.) I can’t help but think that his ebullience could be explained by the baby cooing in his lap.

“Hey, so I have a somewhat upset baby in my arms, but my wife’s coming home in a minute, so if you hear a little screaming, it’s not me, it’s my child,” he laughs.

Curveball number one: “wife.” (Thought he was divorced.) And two: did he say baby? He did say “my” child, right? I attempt to quietly Google Junger’s Wikipedia page to double check his birthdate. January 17, 1962. Does he hear me typing on the other end?

Journalist and author of five critically-acclaimed books, he has enjoyed a 20-year career as a writer with steady work, an accomplishment in itself. Winner of an Emmy and a Sundance Film Festival Grand Jury Prize for his haunting accounts of military life in the Korengal Valley, Junger is a respected documentary filmmaker. Naïve ambition made me ask his agency for a 2-hour in-person interview, and somehow I had ended up with a one-hour phoner. He was traveling, busy visiting with family for the better part of a month.

So in light of the interference his people troubled me with, I’m pleased to hear an approachable if distracted voice on the other end. Aside from puppies, there exists no more endearing distraction than an infant.

He makes a point to thank me each time I mention I read something he penned. We talk about everything, bouncing easily between topics. The rhythm of the conversation reflects Junger’s mastery of interviews. He’s passionate about his book, *Tribe*, and the idea that the experience of American soldiers when they return home from war may have more to do with our exclusive, narcissistic societal structure than the trauma endured in combat. He tells me about his role in an organization he founded, Reporters Instructed in Saving Colleagues, which trains freelance journalists how to treat life-threatening injuries during a three-day course.

RISC pays homage to Tim Hetherington, Junger’s companion embedded with him in Afghanistan, who died covering Libya in 2011. Tim died on his way to the hospital after being hit with shrapnel; Junger maintains he might have lived if his colleagues knew what to do with a wound. Since then, he has arranged for more than 200 journalists to receive training for free so that what happened to Tim doesn’t happen again.

I ask how Junger has changed in the 20 years since *The Performance Storm*.

He chuckles, his ever-so-raspy, bassy voice responding: “My wife just heard the question and pointed to the baby in my lap. I had my first child at 55. Between *Perfect Storm* and now, I became very good at public speaking. I’m much more self assured as a writer. I don’t think my style has changed at all. I’m more comfortable using first person, venturing a moral viewpoint. I was in a lot of combat between then and now, and I stopped covering war after my friend and colleague Tim was killed. I got married and eventually divorced. And life happened to me like it happens to everybody,” he ends, that last nod to the common man a theme in Junger’s discourse.

Maybe Junger is affable during this phase of his life because his most recent book, *Tribe*, signals his foray out of war correspondence. He can be a different kind of author and filmmaker now, if he chooses.

Or maybe the sense of peace he's exuding comes from knowing he can discuss his time as a war reporter knowing he never has to return. It feels really freaking good to be alive.

Because the thing is, you can't talk about Sebastian Junger without talking about war. It's in his blood. And don't get that confused with one's desire to serve his country in the U.S. military. Junger's is an innate hunger, a guttural proclivity for the ability to tell a war's story. That's what compels him—to show people what combat really is, for better or worse. To show us that it's more guts than glory. It's mind-numbingly, earth-shatteringly depressing and ugly as sin.

And yet. It's humanizing and uniting and bonds men together in unimaginable ways.

Junger is done with war. But the effects of it aren't finished with him. He's left it behind in his life as a journalist. It is in the past, but also a part of the present.

To many, Junger could rightfully be perceived as a hero, for immersing himself in heavy combat year after year, returning faithfully to the Korengal Valley for each reporting trip knowing full well he could leave in a body bag. So why in the world did he do it? And where does he go from here?



His blue eyes are fierce, not quite glowering, yet refusing to cloak the exhaustion of a man mature enough to be an AARP cardholder while navigating fatherhood for the first time. A five o'clock shadow contributes to Junger's ruggedness, a man unmistakably strong. The lamentable yellow lighting makes me yearn for fluorescence, though it highlights Junger's thinning hair.

He leans his left shoulder against the wall, settling his hands into his pockets. I've made it my mission to understand who Junger is in light of his time at war. Before you go thinking I'm transfixed on this aspect of his career, remember his work history. "Restrepo," co-directed by Hetherington and nominated for an Oscar, is a combat documentary named after the medic Juan "Doc" Restrepo, killed in action. Its follow-up, "Korengal," is a poignant sequel produced independently by Junger after Hetherington's untimely death.

So far, I know this, of Junger:

He's the guy who boxes daily, a tough guy in every sense.

He's the guy who plays his accordion every day.

He's the guy who wrote an entire book demonstrating the tragedy American individualism poses to veterans, who would derive substantial emotional benefits from tribal, communal living.

He's the guy who doesn't know his neighbors

in the piece of New York City he calls home.

He's the guy who once cried at the sight of an elderly post office worker who was just doing her job. (He had to return later to mail his letters.)

He's the guy who is comfortable before a crowd, but in his quieter moments, he pores over the pages of his deceased father's favorite books, pausing to read his dad's margin monologues.

He's the guy who embedded himself with Battle Company's Second Platoon for a year in the Korengal Valley of Eastern Afghanistan, one of the deadliest outposts during that war, dodging bullets from Taliban insurgents, filming the horrors of war, witnessing men get maimed.

He's the guy who made a family later in life, the daddy to a newborn at 55 years old.

Junger has layers, and he has war to thank for that. It turns out, being hyper-aware of your mortality can really mold a person.

Born in Belmont, Massachusetts, Junger contends that his young life was remarkably uneventful, despite living through the Boston Strangler killings.

"I felt like I needed to be in a situation where I was aware of my physical limits... I didn't grow up that way."

Trying to guess what pushes a man toward war in the first place is a worthless activity; all you can do is work backwards when he's home. For Junger, combat was fulfilling to a soul that never felt whole. Boredom has limitations, but the notion that he never paid his dues, that his life hadn't seen enough hardship, sent him to the trenches.

Ten years after he first stepped foot in the hellish Korengal, Junger says it isn't something he thinks about every day. But when he's reminded of his time in the valley, like when talking to Brendan O'Byrne, a former team



Junger addresses fans outside the Cinopolis Chelsea theatre.

leader in Battle Company, Second Platoon, he thinks it was all worth it.

"I'm particularly close to Brendan. We're like, extremely good friends. We talk almost every day. He lives sort of near me. So I'm a hundred times closer to him than the next person in the platoon, but I hear from some of those guys once in awhile."

Junger answers questions quickly, our talk resembling a fast-paced tennis match. He doesn't take my nonverbal cues to keep babbling while I'm figuring out my next question. He says what he wants to say and stops when he's done; there will be no indulging the interviewer with an extended chat. He shifts his feet, angling his body toward the gold painted wall and waiting for the next question. Junger isn't talking with his hands today, like I've seen him do in YouTube TED Talks.

And then it occurs to me as the lobby empties out and guests gather in nearby theatres for other screenings: Junger doesn't want to be a hero, nor does he think himself any more courageous than a features desk reporter whose gravest danger is missing a deadline.

He isn't too proud to admit the fear and anxiety associated with combat—that would make him a self-involved fool. Rather, Junger knows that feelings of angst mean that it matters, so he leans into it. He has always been interested in doing work that changes our consciousness in some way, be it soldiers, refugees, what have you.

In 2016, Junger said publically that he was finished writing about war.

"I didn't want my wife to have to go through either my death or worrying that I would die while I was working. I did [worry], but I was willing to trade that worry for the occasion to work. But when I realized that I was trading her worry for the occasion to work, that didn't seem very noble."

LITTLE KNOWN FACTS

He co-owns a bar in NYC called The Half King, a haunt for artists and writers.

In the early days of his writing career, he would sometimes cut down trees in residential areas for \$200-\$1,000 per day.

He read Gillian Flynn's "Gone Girl" in one sitting.

The Associated Press recently reported that the ship that was the subject of *The Perfect Storm* was intentionally sunk off the New Jersey and Delaware coasts to become part of an artificial reef.

Still, Junger says the cost of war reporting hasn't overcome him. "[The benefits] definitely outweigh the cost," he tells me, nodding confidently. "I'm not talking about Tim getting killed, but for me personally... the costs aren't that great. Like I didn't die, I wasn't wounded. War reporting is not that unsafe. There's thousands of war reporters, and thank God, only a handful get killed every year. I've done assignments that have lasted a few weeks or months, but I've had friends who were in the Peace Corps for two years. Like, I didn't do that."

So, what scares a man who says war reporting isn't scary?

No, it isn't a riddle. Besides, he wrote a whole chapter on fear for *War*. Sebastian Junger gets scared at the boxing gym, and he keeps going

back. He says it has nothing to do with his work as a journalist. It's just a kick of adrenaline.

"Boxing is an incredible synthesis of physical capabilities. It's not just staying in shape. If you're sparring somebody for three minutes, it's scary, and running's not scary." He looks at me seriously, his crow's feet glowing underneath the light. "I'm pretty normal," he says.

I ask Junger what his weekend plans are; it's New York City, I figure. "When you have a baby, that pretty much takes up all your time," he laughs. It isn't the inauthentic jest of someone who's miserable inside. It's a man stating a fact.

I take a crack at a question I think destined to end the interview the moment it leaves my lips: why have a kid in your mid-50s? It wasn't deliberate, of course, but like many unplanned events in life, it's a pleasant surprise. Junger says the recent changes in his life make him "enormously happy."

"Experiencing trauma expands you personally... like having children expands you, or whatever. You understand humanity a little bit better when you're exposed to children. They're very unfiltered little creatures, you can see the primate in us. I don't know. I'm new at this," he says honestly.

I'm beginning to grow uncomfortable leaning against the wall of the Cinopolis, doing my darndest to simulate ease. No grand revelations have come to mind about the prolific author standing before me. There's no way to answer the question, "Who is Junger?" because there's no way to answer that question for any other man.

He is himself—the culmination of decades as a journalist and man who encountered life and death and everything in between. He is contradiction and communion, wisdom and folly, consternation and boldness. Extraordinary, yet the everyman. Junger is an antithesis—in meaningful ways, he is the opposite of himself.

"I'm 55 years old. I think I'm a reasonably nice person. I've had a pretty safe life in a lot of ways. I'm almost always happy," he says with conviction.

And for the first time in a lifetime, Junger has no clue what's next, nor does he care to.

"I've accomplished most of what I've wanted to accomplish," so there's no rush to move forward. His future days will include the staples: reading, boxing, playing music and nurturing a young life.

I thank him for his time and ask a theatre employee to take our photo. "Don't you want the bar in the picture?" she teases, only I don't think she's kidding. "Just over here will be fine," I say. Junger slings his right arm over my shoulder and we pose. Finally, I ask him to sign *War*, anticipating a half-baked two-second signature.

He obliges, and I check the camera to see how our photos turned out. As I gather my belongings to travel back to Harlem, he hands it back. I flip to the title page. "To Angela - Thank you so much for the interview... it was a pleasure to meet you. Sebastian Junger."

I close my book and look around to thank him one last time. Then I spot him, nearly to the elevator across the lobby. Just like that, he's off into the spring TriBeCa night.

LOST AND FOUND IN TRANSLATION



Story by Tyler Hicks -- Photos courtesy of Brooke Jarvis

Brooke Jarvis earns a living venturing into forgotten, dying places--and she wouldn't have it any other way

She'll never admit it, but Brooke Jarvis is like Indiana Jones—assuming Indy turns in his bullwhip for a ballpoint pen. Jarvis, a Seattle resident by way of Tennessee, has traveled to every corner of the world to tell stories of people and groups on the margins. In the last few years, her work has been published in the likes of *GQ*, *Rolling Stone*, *Harper's* and *Pacific Standard*. These stories often shine a light on the earth's mysteries, like her tale of disappearing islands in Papua New Guinea. Other times, her work plunges into the depths of despair in some of the world's forgotten corners—like her critically acclaimed narrative “When We Are Called to Part.”

In the latter, Jarvis recounts her days living in the Kalaupapa community on Moloka'i, an island once quarantined and isolated as a home for lepers. When many of her University of Richmond friends shipped off to internships and 9-to-5's, the recently graduated Jarvis headed to a leprosarium on an island in Hawaii. The community was home to a shrinking population that Jarvis would help care for as an intern. She was supposed to stay six months, but would soon extend the trip—she had become a part of the community.

Like many of her stories, “When We Are Called to Part” is a haunting chronicle of loss. Yet Jarvis' personal narrative also evokes the beauty and hope that pervaded this land of despair. In doing so, she gives the real people of Kalaupapa the one thing of which they were always deprived: a place to tell their story.

By telling this story, Jarvis was able to show us a world that we were told didn't matter; by writing it, she was able to heal.

Your work takes you all over the world, yet you seem to be churning out a story more often than most. I'm curious about the down time. What do you do when you're not researching or writing?

Oh wow, what is “down time?” I can assure you that my life is incredibly boring, but I do have the best job in the world. A couple years ago, I was on a reporting trip on Maui, and I was writing about endangered forest birds. I would go to these places that very few people had ever been, and just scour the forest in the mud and rain, looking for birds we never found. I kept thinking that this was really more like an amazing vacation than a job, and I love that I get to do that for a living. However, that's a very small percentage of my time. Before I go out, I have to do a huge amount of legwork and pre-reporting, and sometimes those stories don't happen. That's often what my down time looks like. I get off into the mountains as often as I can, and I like crafty sorts of things. Most of the time I'm hanging out with friends, cooking and going on walks. Usually that involves a lot of thinking about whatever I'm writing at the time. But it's not as adventurous as it sounds—there's a lot of quilting and lino cutting involved.

One thing that struck me about all your work is that you're always writing about groups on the margins and subjects that we never really hear about. Is that intentional on your part?

Yes and no. On some level, every freelance writer is looking for those surprising stories, because that's a great way to get an audience's attention. I think readers and people in general are primed to think, “Oh, I've heard this before, I know everything about it,” and one way to cut through that is to come at them from a place that they may not know much about. That's definitely true of me, as well. There's a personal element to all the stories. I get excited when I hear about something I know nothing about, and I have a lot of questions and curiosity about it. My writing is a reflection of me trying to chase those questions.

When did you realize that you wanted to be a writer?

It was a little bit of a process. I edited my high school newspaper, but newspaper writing didn't appeal to me as something I should continue with. I didn't study journalism in college or work on the newspaper or anything like that. I majored in English and Spanish Lit, because those were the classes I liked best. I figured I would figure it out and go to grad school at some point, but I never did. Then, when I studied abroad in Argentina, I talked to a friend who pointed out to me that what I seemed to really like was great storytelling. So I got interested in writing, but didn't really find the kind of writing that that interested me just yet. After college, I interned with *YES! Magazine*, which is a nonprofit focused on sustainability and social justice. Every story focuses on what can be done about these grave problems. That eventually turned into a job as their web editor, and while I was there I discovered the world of literary nonfiction. That style appealed to me to a lot, and I started to feel like our search was disingenuous. Our problems are so big, and trying to make solutions seem relevant enough was tough. So I was in search of something a little more nuanced, and I decided to freelance.

It's given you the opportunity to write so many interesting stories, but did you ever fear freelancing?

Oh yes, definitely. I used to have this idea that you get on a conveyor belt. And whatever decision you make whisks you away somewhere, and you're just stuck with it. But I think the reality is, the longer you're out in the world, the more opportunities open up for you. You're not on a single path—there are more and more branching paths every time. So my biggest fear was that I would take a wrong turn and be screwed, but I don't think that's how it works. There's usually another turn to make. When it came to leaving *YES!*, I knew that it was time for me to make a change no matter how scary it was. I saved up money before quitting, then gave myself a year to see if freelancing was viable. If it wasn't I would go get a real job. I was petrified, and I remember meeting up with friends after work on the day that I quit. I burst into tears, and they were like, “This is a good thing!” I didn't believe them at the time, because we were all in this rural community where no one had a traditional job or salary. A couple months after that, my friend was doing some work on his house and offered to

pay me to help. I thought, “Well, I’m a freelance writer now, so should probably take any paying gig that comes my way.” So my first paying job as a freelance writer was digging ditches.

What was the first story you ever pitched, and how has your approach to pitching evolved throughout your career as a freelancer?

I remember pitching *Grist* early on, and my first official story for them was a piece about aquaculture. This guy was trying to make a more sustainable fish and bring it to market. They paid me \$300, so a little bit better than the ditch digging. After that, I branched out, while still trying to utilize the connections I’d made. I always have a long list of projects I’m interested in, and I have a tendency to fill my plate and then empty it. Even when I’m working on other stories, I’m always adding to my list of potential projects and moving things around to match what I’m most passionate about. I always want to avoid pitching something just because I think it will sell, because I may not be as lit-up about it as I am about something else. If I do that, all I’ll think about while I’m writing it is every other story I’d rather be writing.

It seems like you had that freelancer’s mindset long before you embarked on this journey. For example, your first job out of college was this internship at this leprosarium on Moloka’i. What about that opportunity initially enticed you?

It was just so outside of my wheelhouse, and I had tons of questions. Mainly, I was curious what life was like there, because there were so many aspects to it. There’s the patients, the history, the quarantine and then there was all the modern stuff about the remoteness and its isolation. It felt like I couldn’t not apply. But when I was living there, I was not planning on writing about the experience. I was asked to lead a church service once, and I think that was their way of telling me, ‘If you’re gonna be here, you have to be here.’ It didn’t strike me until later that this was a really interesting story, particularly because that area has been written about before but never from this perspective. I wanted to add the story of what it felt like to be there in its last years as a patient community.

One of the key questions you raise in your story about your time there is this idea of preservation: Who decides what we preserve, and what does that preservation look like. Do you see writing as an act of preservation?

I’ve never really thought of it that way, but it certainly is. You’re capturing what things are like at a certain moment, and everything changes, but you have that to go back to. I love reading old newspaper stories or *New Yorker* stories—things that were not necessarily meant to be read decades later. They were written for their moment, but I really enjoy dipping back into other times. And there’s always something to learn. Good

writing always translates well if it really captures a certain story or character. The world is big and diverse and sometimes beyond our understanding, but you can always relate to other people. You may not have much in common with someone on the other side of the world, but you both may know what it feels like to lose someone you love. Good stories help bridge those gaps and help us connect.

How did your year on Moloka’i shape you as a writer?

That was one of the first long stories I wrote, and I was still learning the craft of writing. In fact, I still see myself as pretty new to this and learning a lot with each story. When I was living there, I wasn’t taking the notes that I would’ve taken had I known I was going to tell this story. Even though I was there for a while, the details weren’t originally as rich, so I had to re-examine my time among these people through a different lens. But what I learned was how to write about people you know and care about. There’s a huge amount of responsibility that comes with that, and it’s scary. In a way, I was more motivated than ever to get it right, because I felt obligated to do them justice.

How do you decompress after writing emotionally draining stories?

For me, the writing is how I decompress. That’s the part where I process what I experienced, which is both really hard and satisfying. At the end, I usually feel like I’ve dealt with the emotions and come to terms with what happened. The writing itself is how I deal with what happened.

What does the power of words mean to you?

Everybody is worried about the death of journalism or the death of longform, but instead, it’s had this flowering of interest. I do think that longform fans are ultimately a small subset of the population though, and I try to think outside my happy longform world. Not everyone loves long stories, but I like to think that they have value for everyone. I believe in the power of words in that there are certain sentences that just blow me away, and I believe in the power of storytelling to bring us together. Reading is an experience that shows you different ways to look at things, and hopefully helps you get closer to other people. Regardless of what happens, I don’t think that’s ever going away.





WORDS ARE ONLY AS POWERFUL AS THE HEROES WHO USE THEM

Story by Tyler Hicks - Photos courtesy of Tom Huang

Tom Huang is used to having dinner a little late. When he pulled into his driveway around 8 p.m. after a typically busy Thursday in the newsroom, the *Dallas Morning News* editor had two things on his mind: food (his typical palate of chicken, rice and tomatoes) and maybe, just maybe, a little bit of that foreign feeling known as relaxation. The blistering 94-degree heat had yet to let up, but the sun was down, and a long day at work meant the Sunday and Enterprise Editor needed some rest before hitting the pavement again bright and early.

Then his phone blew up.

Buried in a myriad of texts, notifications and emails was an important message from the *DMN's* Breaking News Editor. There was an active shooter downtown, and every reporter near the area needed to get there. Now.

The last Tom had heard the Black Lives Matter-led protest was proceeding peacefully. Now shots had been

fired, and no one knew by whom. The editor rushed out the door, got into his '97 white Honda and raced off toward the scene of what would become the deadliest night for police in American history.

No one wanted to be in downtown Dallas on the night of July 7, 2016, but that's exactly where Tom Huang and his fellow *Morning News* reporters were headed.

There was no other choice, and no other work he'd rather be doing—much to the dismay of his parents.



Huang's mother and father both fled China in the late 1950s, and then met as graduate students in Taiwan. Shortly after, they came to the United States and started a family in Boston. Tom's father was a professor of electrical engineering, and expected all four of his children to pursue careers in math and

science. For a time, all of them did—including Tom.

"I was really interested in and good at a few things," he says. "Math, reading and writing." The young Huang fell in love with storytelling by consuming as many comic books as he could, then writing his own. "They were The Supers: A group of genetically mutated cavemen people who were outcasts from society, like the X-Men."

"All my favorite characters were misfits."

Eventually, Tom put down the pen and shipped off to MIT to study computer science. While working toward his Bachelor's, he joined the staff on *The Tech*, a twice-weekly newspaper on campus. "Originally, it was just a way to keep writing," he recalls. "I had never met a journalist, and had no intention of ever becoming a journalist." But he stayed on staff even after he graduated and began his Master's work, and he eventually started to take

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on more complicated stories.

Cambridge, Massachusetts was fraught with homelessness in the late 1980s, so Tom set out to chronicle the struggles of the homeless that lived just a few miles from the MIT campus. After spending a day on desolate streets and in abandoned warehouses, he knew he couldn't go back to a comp sci lab. "Computer science is a great line of work, but it didn't inspire me in the way that going out and reporting did."

Tom decided to pursue a career as a journalist—a move that "shocked and disappointed" his mother and father. They had invested a small fortune in his education, and now he was plunging into the unknown. The decision irrevocably changed his relationship with his parents.

"Early on, I had to distance myself from them. I knew that if I stayed close to them, I would be tempted to fall back into what they wanted me to do. So I had to be on my own."

But he wouldn't have to be on his own for long. Around the same time he told his parents his decision, Tom saw a flyer for a journalism internship fair at the *Newsday* headquarters on Long Island. It would be the first step toward the career he wanted.

"I interviewed with around 30 people in one day, but no one was really interested—except for one guy from the *Cleveland Plain-Dealer*."

The editor was confused why a computer scientist was at a career fair for journalists, and questioned Tom about the future of computers in reporting. He was so impressed with this kid from MIT that he hired him for the summer.

Over the next 15 months, Tom lived out of two suitcases while writing for four different newspapers in four different cities: Cleveland, Norfolk, Virginia, Roanoke, Virginia and Greensboro, North Carolina. "It was probably the hardest time in my life. I had to learn the ropes while hopping from one newsroom to the next, learning the different beats and editors."

The youngster got a crash course in reporting when he had to go to the scene of the GreekFest riots of 1989. Tom, then writing for the *Virginian-Pilot*, reported to Virginia Beach wearing his glasses and carrying a notebook, and soon lost both: A rioter snatched his notebook and tore it to pieces, and Tom honestly doesn't remember how he lost his glasses—or how he got enough material for a story.

Still, he cites these turbulent 15 months as the time where he became a reporter.

Kelly McBride interned with Tom during this time, and still remember meeting the meek kid with the glasses.

"I thought I was a hotshot from Mizzou who knew it all, and there was no way this guy could hang with me," she says. "But I learned so much from Tom, and I'm still learning from him. And he bought us all Bob Dylan tickets."

The meek, bespectacled Bob Dylan fan was hundreds of miles

away from his family, friends and the life he knew, but Tom Huang was happy.

Nearly 30 years later, the veteran reporter still smiles when he talks about those two suitcases, and chuckles when he thinks about what the guy from Cleveland asked him that one winter in Long Island: "He wanted to know if I ever thought robots would be able to replace journalists."

Tom said no—you need humans to tell human stories.



Tom's 1997 White Honda hit a wall of traffic as he tried to maneuver towards the shooting. Police had already blocked off many of the roads leading downtown, and an officer was yelling at drivers and pedestrians, demanding they head back the opposite direction. Tom pulled a U-turn, ditched the Honda and walked toward the scene of the crime.

Meanwhile, two of Tom's former interns were racing around the city. Sarah Mervosh and Charlie Scudder were interviewing witnesses, chasing down leads and coordinating with the dozen



other *Morning News* interns and staffers scattered across Dallas.

"All I remember was pure chaos," Mervosh says. "Everything was one big, chaotic blur." The fact that something like this happened just miles from where they work took a toll on both her and Scudder—a local boy. But they persevered, thanks in part to the advice of their former supervisor.

"You don't really think about this happening in your own backyard," Scudder says. "But it's our job to go out there and bear witness."

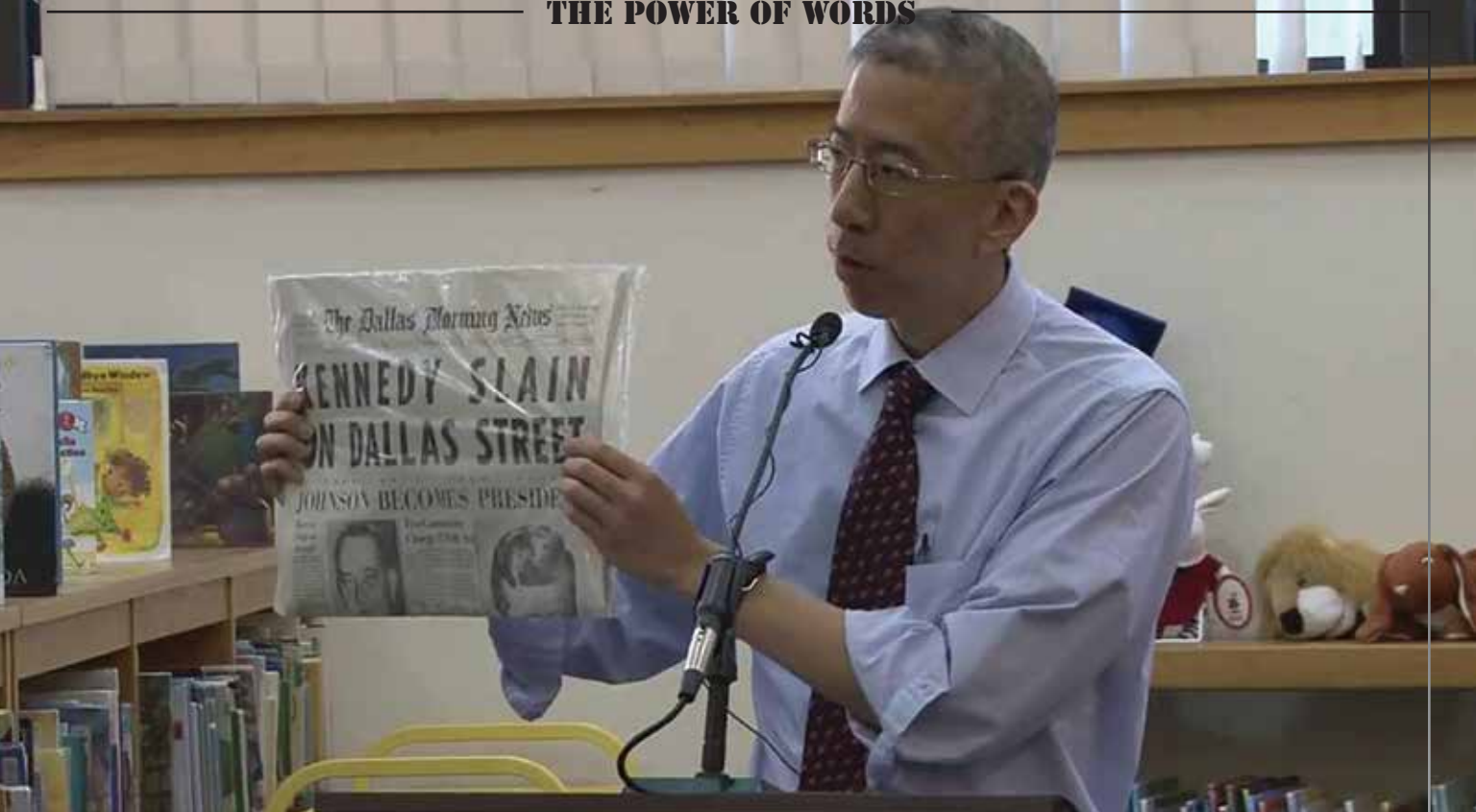
Scudder cites "Papa Huang's" mentorship as a crucial reason why he was able to cover the chaos and cope with the aftermath.

"Tom is focused on making sure your career is alright, but also that you're alright, too," he says. "Not many people care about both."

Mervosh knows that without Tom's tutelage she might not be the writer she is today—the writer that was able to crank out multiple stories in the 12 hours between Micah Johnson's first shot and the first ray of sunlight. "Tom showed



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me that sometimes you have to let your emotion drive the story," she says. "And he pushes you to go places you don't want to go."

Like Mervosh, Scudder doesn't remember many details from that night—but he does remember running into Tom. "He was as composed as ever," he recalls. "And we needed that." As the two reporters conversed with some coworkers back in the newsroom, breaking news flashed on a nearby TV. A reporter went live with the news that four police officers had died.

"Tom stopped, turned to the TV, and everyone else followed his lead," Scudder says. "He just stared at the TV for a few moments, and you could tell he was trying to register what happened. But then he got right back to it."

It wasn't his first brush with tragedy.



At the end of his 15-month trial-by-fire, Tom found a home in Dallas. It was the end of 1993, and the young reporter kickstarted his *Morning News* career as a features writer. Roughly a year later, Timothy McVeigh killed 168 people in the deadliest act of domestic terrorism in American history. The *Morning News* dispatched Tom to Oklahoma City.

"I remember having a moment where I wondered if this was really what I wanted to do," Tom recalls of his time in Oklahoma. He was tasked with

talking to victims' family members, and one day, he went to a house full of orphaned children. He wasn't the only reporter on the story—a TV news crew had followed him there in the hopes of capturing the children's reactions as they processed the deaths of their parents.

"I didn't know if that was something I wanted to be a part of," he remembers. "It wasn't what I signed up for."

When he returned to Dallas, Tom continued to write features and the offbeat page-turners that would eventually earn him and future intern Mike Mooney the unofficial title of "freak beat" reporter. But he was far from finished as a national and international

reporter for the *Morning News*.

In the late 90s, he traveled to Bosnia and stayed at a makeshift refugee camp for three weeks, and after 9/11, he flew to Manhattan with DMN photographer Richard Pruitt in tow. Tom and Pruitt walked the length of Broadway, stopping to chat with anyone that wanted to share their story, their views or simply a joke.

Stories like these always grounded Tom, and made him remember why he fell in love with reporting. "As journalists, we're trying to understand things," he says. "Oftentimes we see things that we can't understand, but if you dig a little deeper, you can help make sense of it."





But his love of reporting isn't the only thing keeping him around. Dave Tarrant, Tom's colleague for over two decades, has high praise for the different strengths his old friend brings to the table. Specifically, the longtime Dallas reporter remembers one story that showed how powerful Tom's writing can be.

"It was this story about two brothers, and how one of them was caring for the other as he died," Tarrant says. "The way he wrote it showed how much empathy and care he brought to each story, and that's stayed with me for twenty years."

That's not all Tarrant picked up from Tom over the years.

"The most important things I learned from Tom were all about how you have to take care of yourself," he says. "You have to know when to take time, and you always have to know when to be with your family."

Ultimately, Tarrant believes Tom's talents extend beyond the newsroom—and into the classroom.

"More than anything, Tom is a teacher," he says.

For the past ten years, Tom has flexed those teaching muscles as a faculty member at the Poynter Institute. Every year, he travels to Florida to teach the rising crop of young journalists in courses in ethics, diversity, writing and leadership. When he first set foot on the campus in St. Petersburg, fellow teacher Roy Peter Clark joked about how different the two of them were.

"I'm loud and boisterous and theatrical in the classroom, while we always used to tell Tom he needs a mic—and not just in the classroom," Clark says. But the veteran writer knows that Tom's temperament and style is an asset to Poynter and newsrooms in general.

"Tom has the hardware and the software," Clark says. "One day

we'll be able to look back and see the family tree of editors and writers he created."

In Dallas, Tom's family tree has flourished since his time as a features editor to his new post as the leader of audience engagement. Along the way, he's helped writers tighten countless stories, all the while taking a hands-on editing approach.

"My time with Tom was the only time I ever had an editor in the same room with me," former "Freak Beat" writer Mike Mooney says. The duo wrote stories about Goths, gay rugby and real-life fight clubs, but Mike's favorite Tom story is the day he came into the office in full-on Klingon regalia. "We had just finished a story about a Klingon club, and he walked into the office like he had just walked off the set of Star Trek," Mooney recalls with laughter. "I think he and Mike Merschel still hang Star Trek ornaments on the Merschel family Christmas tree every year."

Fact-check: They do.

Everyone in the family tree has some kind of Tom story, and it typically involves cats or editing quirks.

Mervosh remembers turning in a story to Tom without asking what beer the subject drank: "He made me call back and ask, and now I'll never forget that guy loves to drink Dos Equis."

"He never lets you be satisfied with X and Y," Scudder says. "You always have to get Z."

As for his immediate family, Tom keeps in close contact with his sisters—computer scientists-turned-full-time moms—and his younger brother Roger, a computer scientist who, like Tom, jumped ship for journalism. He's now the top editor at a website that focuses on environmental issues. Tom is unmarried and has no kids of his own, but hopes to change that someday.

"I'd love to get married and have kids; it just hasn't happened yet."

He can't pinpoint an exact reason why it hasn't worked out with any of his past girlfriends, but it may have something to do with his stubbornness.

"Maybe the '97 white Honda tells you all you need to know."

The car has been stolen (and returned) twice, and Tom has no plans to move on. He's



loyal, but also stuck in his ways. He dated journalist Anne Bothwell for eight years, but the two broke up when Tom took the fellowship at Poynter.

“We’re both very independent people, and we weren’t able to figure it out. But she’s a great friend, and a great person.”

Tom’s inability to settle down worries McBride, who is hopeful that the reporter she’s seen blossom from quiet intern to transformative teacher will eventually find someone.

“Above all, I hope this story gets Tom a date,” she says, only half-joking. McBride recounts a time when Tom traveled to Turkey in the winter, and wrote about his journey in a Facebook post. “The story was hysterical classic Tom because he went to a place that makes him uncomfortable, which is what we tell journalists to do. But, it’s New Year’s Eve and he’s alone. And that makes me sad.”

McBride isn’t alone in her hopes that Tom eventually finds a wife—his parents have been asking him about it for decades. Even so, his relationship with Mom and Dad has improved in recent years, even if they’re still hoping he returns to school and attains a Ph.D. Even though



Tom has written extensively about his new role as a caregiver. In a recent piece, he visited his hometown to attend a ceremony for his father. He watched as decades of his dad’s old students gathered to honor Dr. Huang, and later eyed his mother speaking with her physical therapist.

“I’m proud of my children,” his mom said.

“They tell me that pretty often nowadays, but I guess I’m still not used to hearing that.”

Tom smiles just thinking about it.



There wasn’t a lot of time to chat with coworkers in the days and weeks after July 7. True to form, Tom didn’t talk much—but he did check in on Scudder.

“He knew I grew up here, and he knew it was hard for me to see,” Scudder says. “Whenever he could, he pulled me aside to see how I was doing.”

Around that time, Mervosh remembers the editorial staff abandoning their offices and taking up seats next to reporters and interns. She remembers Tom being alongside the team every step of the way.

“A lot of people get into this business because they want to save the world, but it’s not just about the stories you write,” she says. “It’s about the people, too.”

“Tom showed me there’s more than one way to save the world.”

Apart from his check-ins with colleagues, Tom didn’t talk much—he wrote.

In an essay published one week after what was supposed to be a quiet Thursday night at home, Tom reflected on why he chose to leave his office and sit with his Supers—the newbies, veterans and mentees who he had no plans to stop mentoring.

“I want to be in the middle of the newsroom,” he wrote. “I want to see everything, I want to hear everything, I want to remember everything. I want to absorb the laughter and the shouting and the tears.”

“Because when I’m old and decrepit and they have to drag me out of the newsroom, I’ll at least know one thing: This is what I loved.”



Roger is also a journalist, the family has never talked about writing or reporting.

“I don’t think they understood what it is I do, and I’ve never showed them any of my work.”

Tom admits that this may be slightly immature, but old habits die hard.

“I got to a place where I didn’t want to ever have to prove myself to them, and I guess I’m still there.”

Both of his parents are in hospice care, and

AGENTS OF CHANGE

FOUR LITERARY AGENTS PROVIDE INSIGHT INTO SELLING YOUR WORK

Story by Amanda Talbot -- Illustrations by Meredith Tempio

Harold Ober, Alexander Pollock Watt, or Don Congdon sound familiar? Probably not, but these people helped bring us timeless classics like *The Great Gatsby*, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* and *Fahrenheit 451*. These books adorn our home libraries and enrich our English classes in school, but the literary agents behind these works remain unknown to the general public, and even to some in the literary world.

The literary agent is the unsung hero. He envisions the big picture while simultaneously navigating publishers, dead-

Jim Donovan



lines, edits and the market. The agent is the middleman that perceives potential and helps the right writer connect with the right house at the right time. Still, many find themselves in a

OUR AGENTS

Jim Donovan

Dallas

Founder and President, Jim Donovan Literary

Specialities: Fiction – thrillers and mysteries; Nonfiction – biographies, pop culture, American history, general narrative, nonfiction, and military

Jim Hornfischer

Austin

President, Hornfischer Literary Management, L.P.

Specialities: commercial and serious nonfiction, memoirs, science, history

David R. Patterson

New York City

Stuart Krichevsky Literary Agency, Inc.

Literary fiction with a focus on journalists, scholars, public figures, and performers, as well as narrative and idea-driven nonfiction

BJ Robbins

Los Angeles

Founder, BJ Robbins Literary Agency

Specialities: fiction and nonfiction, history, memoir, biography, sports, medicine, health, pop culture, travel/adventure

fog when it comes to understanding the role of the literary agent in the publishing world.

In an attempt to demystify this often complex career field, I spoke to four literary agents who

have become Mayborn Conference regulars: Jim Donovan, Jim Hornfischer, David R. Patterson and BJ Robbins.

Describe the role of the literary agent to someone outside of the literary world.

Donovan: The literary agent wears a lot of hats, but the main thing that a literary agent offers to a writer is getting their work seen by quality editors. In other words, getting the right editor, at the right house, for that specific writing project.

Hornfischer: An agent is a publishing matchmaker, editorial advisor and partner, and a dealmaker.

Patterson: First and foremost, we are here to help them [writers] define what idea they want to jump into and then to help them prepare their work to sell it as effectively as possible to the most appropriate and finest publisher we can arrange. We also play a lot of other roles, like potentially helping a writer sell their works to film or TV or documentary. A goal that I often feel is to arrange for a relationship between the writer and the editor that is so good that it goes on for, ideally, maybe years and multiple books. Because we stay put, and our relationship hopefully remains in tact, we can be there with them over the long arc of their career.

Robbins: Our primary role is to sell a book to a publisher and secure a writer a publishing contract. But, we are also considered by the publishers to be a filter for good material. So what we are doing is sort of curating the material for them. Most publishers these days don't look at unsolicited manuscripts. So, if you have a book that you want to sell to a standard, traditional publishing company, you need a literary agent to do that for you. Once we do secure a publishing contract, we handle a lot of the subsidiary rights for the author. We handle any problems within the publishing house during the publication process. Without an agent, authors have to negotiate and navigate on their own, which can many times be problematic.

What advice would you give to your younger self?

Hornfischer: I would say get started quick, because this business is going to be getting harder.

Patterson: I was an editor for a decade. I do not consider it some necessary prescription that every would-be agent work as an editor for a decade. But for me that was good. I enjoyed a great deal of my time in house. I feel like it exposed me over the course of many days, many years, and many books to see how decisions get made inside publishing houses.

David R. Patterson



I probably make use of that experience every single day in my life as an agent.

Robbins: I think the main thing is to have patience to find really good material. The thing about agents is we have to deal with the same publishers over and over again. I want to send them high quality material that they're going to want to publish. I think at the beginning when I was first an agent, I would just take things on, because I was eager to get my business going. The longer I did it, I started to become a lot more discerning about what I would represent and the kinds of the books I wanted to have my name behind.

What is the weirdest thing that has happened to you in your career?

Donovan: About ten years ago I was contacted by an anonymous man—through his attorney, so I didn't know where he lived—who claimed that he had killed JFK. He had written a manuscript about it entitled *THE MAN ON THE GRASSY KNOLL*, and wanted it published under a pseudonym. The manuscript was suspiciously well written, and when I grilled him on the phone with specific questions he should have known the answers to, he was vague. It was all an elaborate hoax . . . I think.

Hornfischer: A few years ago, a New York City-based death-metal band [Neptune's Inferno] decided to name itself after one of my books.

Patterson: Everyday is a surprise. There are also happy surprises.

BJ Robbins



A client won a Pulitzer yesterday, Jake Bernstein was part of the Panama Papers investigation, and they won a group Pulitzer for that investigation. We knew the Pulitzers were coming up, but one never wants to make predictions as to how they're going to be distributed.

Robbins: A number of years ago, my front door bell rang and I went to the door and there was an elderly man holding a really big book with his ancient mother standing next to him. Like ancient, looked like she was a 110. It was a very hot day and he said, "Mother has written a book," and tried to hand me this gigantic thing. It was a book of astronomy. They had driven from Palm Springs, which is about two hours away to deliver this book to me. All I

Publishing and books keep going and going because people love to read. And as long as publishers keep publishing things people want to read, the industry will stay alive.

BJ ROBBINS

could do was offer them some water and send them on their merry way. I explained this is not how one goes about this, but I felt bad.

What genres are your personal favorites to work on with writers?

Donovan: I like American History. I like working with fiction, because I love editing fiction. But, it's a tougher thing to sell in my humble opinion. It's really tough to find, because the writing in a novel - it's a different kind of writing than nonfiction.

Hornfischer: Narrative nonfiction, history, current affairs are my strengths. I do a lot of military history, biographies, world history different types, economics, strategy, so those are kind of the sweet spots for me.

Patterson: Most of my clients are writing nonfiction, and most of those writers are writing a kind of investigative narrative nonfiction. Usually those writers are writing about a story that they broke or they somehow defined or claimed, maybe it's an idea they articulated very well that they've been able to put a name on if it's a kind of idea driven book. That is what I also read in my spare time.

Robbins: My list is about 50 percent fiction, 50 percent nonfiction. I'm always looking for more really solid nonfiction. Memoirs are tough to sell unless the author is really well known, or they have something that a really really strong marketing hook or platform. But, I'm still sort of a sucker for a really good memoir.

How do you think the market has changed or will change in the next few years?

Donovan: I think books [physical books] are going to stick around for a lot of reasons. Last year, eBook sales took a dive. I think there's been a digital fatigue.

Hornfischer: It depends on your view of reading habits. I've got three kids in high school and college age, and they're all vigorous readers and that gives me hope that there'll always be a market for immersive, long-form reading experiences. I'm ultimately an optimist.

Patterson: What has happened for years now, there's been a feeling that the midlist is in danger, and those are generally categorized, as in the past as sort of bread and butter of every house. The books that aren't visibly supposed to be colossal hits from the very beginning but provide a stable existence for the house over time. I think the editors and the houses are looking for big hits. That creates some challenges for writers, particularly mid-career writers. It also creates an environment where the publishers will move even more aggressively to acquire a book if it looks to them like a hit. So, there's a kind of

feeling of scarcity and that sometimes leads to aggressive moves from a publisher to acquire an exciting writer or to keep that writer.

Robbins: I think one of the biggest changes in publishing in the last ten years, was the closing of Borders bookstore chain. I'm not sure the industry has ever completely, fully recovered from that.

Publishing and books keep going and going because people love to read. And as long as publishers keep publishing things people want to read, the industry will stay alive.

It doesn't get easier, I have to say. It was never easy to sell books. It's never been easy to be a literary agent; it's not an easy job. Things don't just fall into your lap and you sell them for buckets of money. There's a lot of work that's involved. And there's a lot of cultivating. Our job is to cultivate relationships with editors at various publishing houses. It's a relationship-based business I would say more than anything else. If you have a really good book, chances are you're going to find a literary agent and you're going to find a publisher. It's difficult for authors; they're always moaning that these things get published that aren't good, etc. But, the truth is that most of the books that are published have a merit in some way or another and there's a reason why they've been published.

How has your agency's strategy to securing talent changed in the last couple of years (or has it stayed the same)?

Donovan: No, it hasn't really changed that much. I get a lot of referrals from other writers. I read a wide range of things in magazines, online, and if I see something in short form that I think is well written, I might contact that writer. So many people want to write a book, but they haven't done the work to become good enough writers. They have a great idea for a book, but they can't write a good enough sentence. It all boils down to being able to write a good sentence and putting those sentences together in a good effective paragraph and so on. People don't pay enough attention to the craft of writing.

Hornfischer: I wouldn't say I have a conscious strategy. I respond to material that I feel has something to say. I suppose increasingly things come to me by referral from existing clients. Certainly, physical submissions have trailed off. Everything is by email. My eyes are always open to what's working in the marketplace. It's a very dynamic and alive process.

Jim Hornfischer



Robbins: It's all about the writing. The personality of the author is a factor at some point, but for me, it really has to be on the page. That's why I think conferences are a really good way for writers to get a sense of what we do and who we are, and what's going to work. But, in the real world it's really better to do it through a letter. Because I figure if a writer can't write a decent query letter, how are they going to write a whole manuscript?

I've got three kids in high school and college age, and they're all vigorous readers and that gives me hope that there'll always be a market for immersive, long-form reading experiences. I'm ultimately an optimist.

JIM HORNFISCHER



JUST JIA

Story by Jade Byers -- Photos courtesy of Jia Tolentino

The It Girl in the Lit World

Jia Tolentino blows into a Fort Greene wine bar the night before Nor'easter Stella was expected to blast New York City with over 12 inches of snow. The storm was a bust but the conversation was not—Jia describes her dog as a “hybrid f----- vigor.” Friendly and a bit hyped, she settles into the stool in a cramped bar facing Myrtle Street. She has just wrapped an interview with an artist for a profile piece she is writing for *The New Yorker*. “I’m new to writing profiles. It’s starting to grow on me. It’s a strange format.” Like most of her new explorations, her tactfulness translates well in the Sam McKinnis profile. “He has a way of appearing simultaneously deadpan and deeply sincere. There’s an offhand, nearly Wildean beauty to his manner and articulation; I found it hard to imagine him ever being old.” She is a new pro and an old poet. This is the essence of Jia Tolentino.

Her cuteness is palpable, her slight features compliment her big teeth and her mouth is jittery—persistently on the verge of smiling. She is comical in both her writing and life, one of those people that can’t leave a conversation without a little jest. She orders a Red Blend; eventually I do the same, much to my chagrin – wine hangovers are wrenching. We discuss the antiquated nature of awkwardly having people taste wine before committing. This is a strange celebration of class and servitude—a theme that regularly presents itself in her writing. Earlier this year she published a piece about the women’s strike and the certain complications of having the impunity to strike. “There’s an underlying note of guilt and aversion in these arguments—a sense that privilege renders a person politically ineffective. In reality, though, as the Women’s March demonstrated, privileged women are uniquely positioned to use their surfeit of cultural leverage to clear space for the causes of everyone else. And that seems to be the fundamental idea of the Women’s Strike: that it could help to forge solidarity between women with favorable working conditions and women who have no such thing.” This version of Jia is responsive activism sprinkled with contemplation. Responsiveness is where her writing resides—moral outrage and pithy exegesis—the yin and yang of cultural commentary. This is the nature of the culture wars and online media—and Jia is the millennial darling of it all.

The daughter of Filipino immigrants, Jia was born in Canada and raised in Houston, Texas. She went to Second Baptist School—a private school rooted in Dooney and Bourke handbags and Pat Robertson Christianity. White-is-right entitlement was a hell of a labyrinth to navigate as a Filipino but Jia was, in her words, an “exceptional minority”—the irony of privilege was never lost on her. Required curriculum included the ability to code-switch and tolerate nuanced forms of racism. She was inextricably aware of how being on the inside looking in has its perks but also many deep conflicts. “Growing up in Houston was good for me in a lot of ways—to be around a lot of very entitled people and learn that I could borrow some of the confidence and ease with which they approached the world.” She thrived, graduating with a letter jacket for cheerleading, a post as the yearbook’s editor-in-chief and a recipient of the Jefferson Scholarship—all at 16. She was able to repackage her exception into a token reality, something that divorced her from the very system that gave her incredible opportunity. You can find remnants of the evangelical experience in her writing. This often manifests itself as sardonically well-intentioned seriousness. During the election she rages at the evangelical vim over candidate Donald Trump. “The ongoing connection between a three-times-married, formerly pro-choice paragon of arrogance and a fleet of people who believe that the earth is a few thousand years old is somehow, miraculously, a bad look for both Trump and the evangelicals.”

Jia is friendly, enigmatically so. Her energy is electric. It takes a few minutes to get it, and it’s further expanded when you are in her physical presence. She rarely skips a beat in discussions of femininity to the fragility of tripping on LSD. She is inspiring and maybe a little infatuated with what she is saying. Even so, she understands that complicated thinking can lead to hang-ups. She can point out how feminism is being exploited through the mechanisms of capitalism while still giving props to the girl with the “future is female”

t-shirt. “I’m never going to write off something [commercial feminism] that makes people feel included—even if it’s just not for me.” She clarifies further, “what bothers me is the proliferation of it seems like the logical end point. What a limited way to see the future—what we can buy and sell each other.”

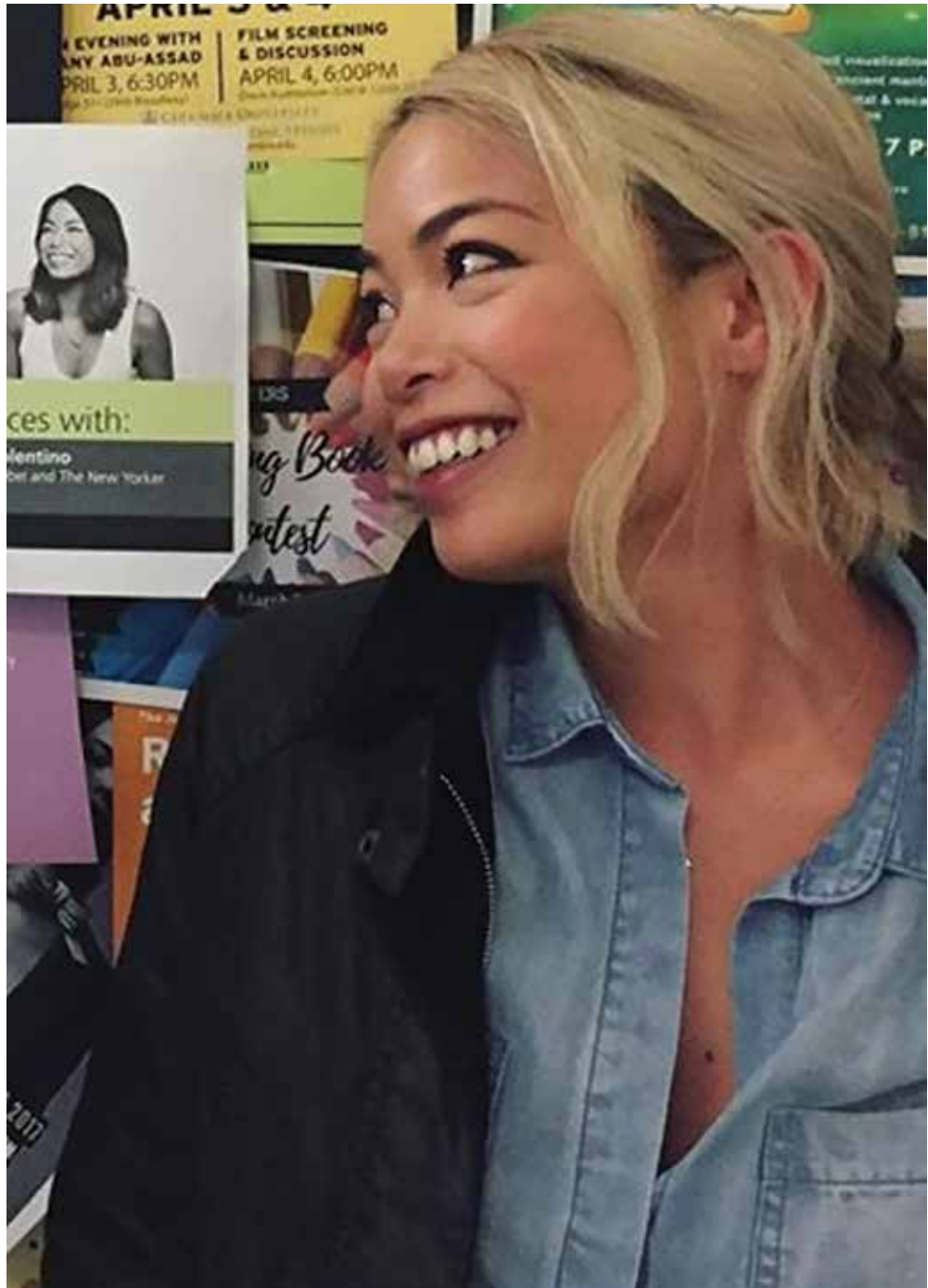
The current iteration of capitalism vis-a-vis exploitative consumerism is only scratching the surface of Jia’s laments. She dipped into the blog scene back in 2013, her final year of grad school at the University of Michigan. Twitter was a household name and blog platforms were quickly becoming the new media status quo. Jia worked for a site focusing on women’s issues and finding a community in like-minded provocation. She took cues from her editor, Emma Carmichael. The site *Hairpin* was a wet dream for Jia. She held Q&As with adult virgins and harped on consumerism and the pressures of milestones in a very “Gossip Girl” way. These are human-interest pieces—reality TV silly or merely a WTF-type response. This was her beat and she was good at it, but not just good—she was exploring dense topics all in the time it takes to have a regular bowel movement. She had a retrospective series on traveling abroad and a self-interview about her time in Kyrgyzstan. Her professional jacket at *Hairpin* reads like a well-thought out Myspace page—charming intention with substantive demand.

She is thoughtful but not crafty, admitting this while retelling a Peace Corps anecdote about smoking hash out of a Coke can—apparently the only viable pipe option in all of Kyrgyzstan. Despite this, her hands imply the craftiness of being up to something, mindful and in unison with her voice, but only when necessary. At times I could almost hear her unquiet mind—the way she navigates conversation is similar to her layered writing approach. This energy could be anxiety, however, she is able to navigate the expectations of “ok-now-what”—usually through reading. This has been a lifelong therapy; one that manifested during the sleepless summers staying up alongside her mom and little brother watching movies or playing video games. By

the time of this interview she had already read 29 books since January. “I have this disturbing energy. I have to read poetry to myself to just, like, settle and click out of this hamster wheel.”

She appreciates the inarticulation and rule-biding of poetry. It is something to lean on, to explain the world, a viable escape from the technological fungus that is the internet. She taught poetry to undergraduates and third-graders, relying on the limitlessness of expression through verse. “It’s the same thing I like about visual art. I’ve always known exactly who I like, and I think I know why, but really I don’t. It’s the same...I don’t know anything about poetry and being with those kids reminded me it doesn’t matter, it’s communication on a nonverbal level.” Back in March, she did a “poetry breakdown” of “Solstice” by Tracy K. Smith via video that affirms her devotion to poetry. “It requires nothing of you than a willing ear. It’s also a mode of engagement that is not argumentative and is full of surprise and full of grace.” But don’t confuse her fascination with words as entirely emotional. Jia isn’t sentimental. She doesn’t hold on to favorite quotes—words are as much costive as they are cathartic. For her, it’s the frontal lobe functioning properly. It’s no wonder she describes her writing as compulsive, or why she wrote a novel in grad school, one she rarely discusses other than to say “it’s been shelved.”

Her character could have developed into many things. She is argumentative despite her frustration with it. She would have made a good lawyer, but political science led to the Peace Corps and that led to fine arts and the rest is in her writing. During our time together, recounting her past prior to New York happened momentarily and mainly to set a scene for a story she hadn’t told—or maybe had—but retelling it was different, fastly intimate. In the event there is a pause, a rare moment to digest a flavor of truth she just laid on you before the next course, the energy builds and it’s almost awkward—at least for you. But Jia doesn’t seem like she has ever had a true moment of mortification. She is a Sim living in virtual reality collecting experiences and filing them away, obviating all the irrelevant bits. The flip-side is perfectly Scorpio, sneaky



and building a mystery. “I like making myself uncomfortable to see if I can fuck with myself, and it’s kind of hard to do.”

I found her nonchalance to be both besot and obnoxious. In a follow up email, I asked what reporters ask: why do you write? Her response was “I write because...I like to!” Which is true—Jia appears eternally hedonistic. To read obsessively, to write cathartically and to interpret life religiously is not for the compromised. One of her most redeeming qualities—save for her lexicon—is her hustle. Plus existentialism remains her state of grace—imagine embracing the truly stoned moments in life and burgeoning in it. It results in heady conclusions. This is how you accept that the world owes you nothing but, even so, life can be utterly unfair. Cultural commentary exists in these parallels and Jia burrows in it with ferocity.

Jia, like most Texans, is prideful of the place that is more like another country than any other state in America. Even so, she is the proximate New Yorker,



fawning over Fort Greene Park and the view of the Empire State building from its Prison Ship Martyrs monument. “I’m never moving. I live across from Pinterest and Chipotle.”

She was invited to New York by former *Hairpin* editor and current best friend Emma Carmichael. After working miles apart and developing *Hairpin*’s voice, they both stepped away: Carmichael first, inviting Jia to follow. The two secured their presence in the evolution of *Jezebel*. Jia was able to maneuver over the new platform with casual brilliance. She examined the Abigail Fisher anti-affirmative action case through the lens of tutoring entitled brats and applying historical reference (spoiler: she was Fisher’s tutor). Beyond that, she was stretching her legs with other media outlets, appearing in the *New York Times* and its magazine, *Time* and *Poetry* magazine. Her *Jezebel* writing contained snapshots of her personality, long-form diatribes that barely offer breath between sentences. Other pieces poked at feminism, inequality, and entitlement. “The world is flooded with injustice in two rough forms: random and systematic. The less privileged experience both kinds as a matter of breathing, but the privileged experience mostly one.”

Her demand increased as she volleyed between writing and editing features for the site. Carmichael and Jia always worked in sync, their relationship unequivocally simpatico. All writers need room to imagine—Carmichael gave her this and the task of managing other writers. “Just like her writing

she has this skill of being able to talk you through an idea in a really beautiful way,” said Carmichael. The two picked a hell of a year to move into the *Jezebel* offices. Emma’s near fatal brush with death really defined their connection and Jia’s service to it. More complications arose at *Jezebel*’s parent company *Gawker*—the media empire Hulk Hogan’s sex tapes toppled—were undergoing lawsuits initially for outing PayPal CEO Peter Thiel and publicizing the Hogan tapes. “I’m not going to defend that post. I am going to defend the freedom that they [*Gawker*] gave to put up that post.” She isn’t conflicted about it, she is the consummate rolling stone—valuing freedom and the freedom to fall from grace.

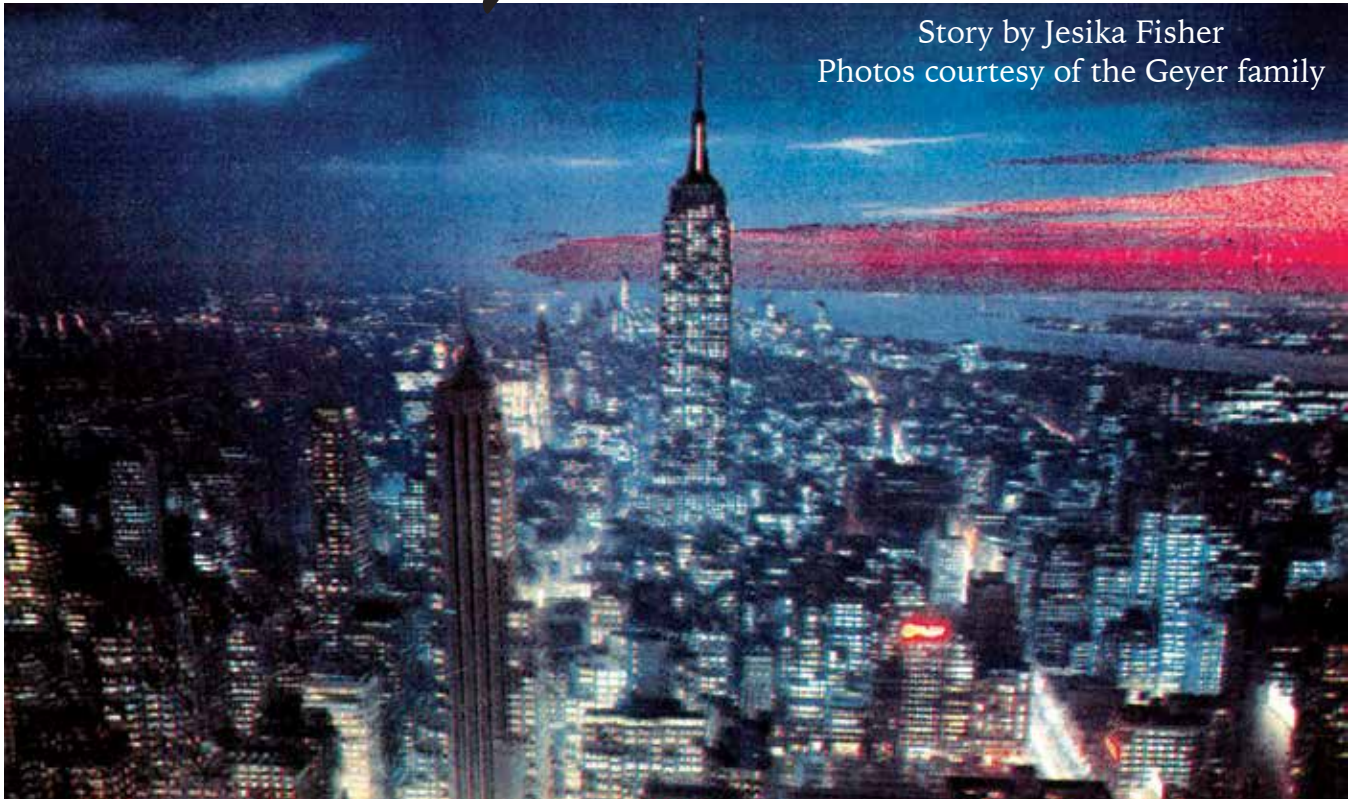
She fingers her necklace, a gold chain that disappears into her almost gilded collar-bone. Her hair is a prairie grass blond, looking unintentionally lovely even pulled back. The hour has turned and the conversation is winding down. We’re both floaty and booze-fed as we discuss the inferno of online commentary and how to maintain personality void of preoccupation. “I try to use it in a way that isn’t prescriptive, to not argue how to think. That’s the thing I hate about the internet. This is how you should think and I hate writing like that. I don’t want to be known for that—and my brain leads me toward it.” She strives to be self-effacing but can’t ignore the nature of contemporary media and the potential collateral of having a brand. “I’m humiliated about having a brand and it’s also inevitable with social media. A brand is the same thing as a personality, or it can be if you think of it as one and not the other.” Personality over persona—*On Writing* with Jia Tolentino.

I ordered another glass, she didn’t, then she did...as the server poured mine. Debating the next cue of inquiry—a pair of simultaneous voyeurs in a momentary exploration. We got jammed up talking about drugs altering the mind. Like all drug talk is mostly fleeting, I felt a facade of kinship—another contradiction we could agree on—drugs are both good and bad. Of course being disarming is in her nature. She is progressively if not provocatively endearing. Teasing life in the ways it teases us makes her a great observer of others—straddling that line of being underestimated and manipulative.

“Getting people to really open up is a skill like flirting and I think it’s as much of a legitimate skill as a guy who’s learned a natural unearned sense of authority.” If she did have a brand, it would be the same as her spirit animal—a chameleon.



Wish you were here



Story by Jesika Fisher
Photos courtesy of the Geyer family

THE POWER OF WORDS

Last summer, a few years after graduating from Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls, I decided to pursue one of my favorite pastimes: Postcard hunting.

I locked my tiny apartment and made a beeline to the Corner Emporium, a cluttered antique store in downtown Wichita Falls filled with old furniture, old buckles, old cowboy hats, old toys, old dolls, old bikes, old books, old clothes and other old novelties. People's cherished possessions, cast off and forgotten, hoping to be rediscovered by bargain hunting strangers.

But none of these curios caught my attention.

My eyes were drawn to a reconstituted card catalogue crammed full of colorful postcards from all over the world – souvenirs of another place, another time. The musty smell of old papers hung in the air as I sorted through the postcards: brightly colored images of well-manicured topiaries, animals, beaches, caverns, cathedrals, restaurants and motels.

My enchantment with postcards grew out of my yen for travel. I'm not a travel junkie (can't afford the habit), not yet anyway. But I wouldn't mind becoming one. Whenever I can, I'm on the road or in the air. In recent years, I've traveled to New York, the "City of Dreams," the Walt Disney World Resort, "The Magic Kingdom" in Orlando, and Toronto, "The Queen City" of Canada, to name just a few major cities on my itinerary. Paris, "The City of Lights," is next up on my bucket list.

So when I spotted several well-traveled postcards in the antique store – one of the "City of Lights" in 1918, another of the Statue of Liberty, circa 1960, and another with Disneyland, the Magic Kingdom in royal letters across the top of the postcard – I felt compelled to claim them as my own.



"Did you find what you were lookin' for?" asked RD "Wally" Waller, manager of the Corner Emporium, as I made my way to the counter.

Wally is in his 70s, with only a little bit of grey hair left around the back part of his head. His face is a map of wrinkles set off by rosy pink cheeks, like the sunset over desert earth. He wears a pair of round, thick-rimmed glasses and favors striped polo shirts.

I didn't know, exactly, what sort of postcards I was looking for. I was just excited to see so many of them. At airport retailers and tourist shops, I discovered that postcard stands were generally relegated to the rear of the stores, and the number and variety of postcards were paltry, at best.

But at the Corner Emporium the card catalogue was overflowing with thousands of alluring, action-packed postcards – with smoking volcanoes belching their fury into the sky to giant horned rabbits (jackalopes) hopping across the Southwest. I felt these postcards were trying to speak to me, to tell me their story. I couldn't take my eyes off them. I began leafing



Fran and Don Cole

through every postcard, starring at every fading image, every scribbled word.

Hi,

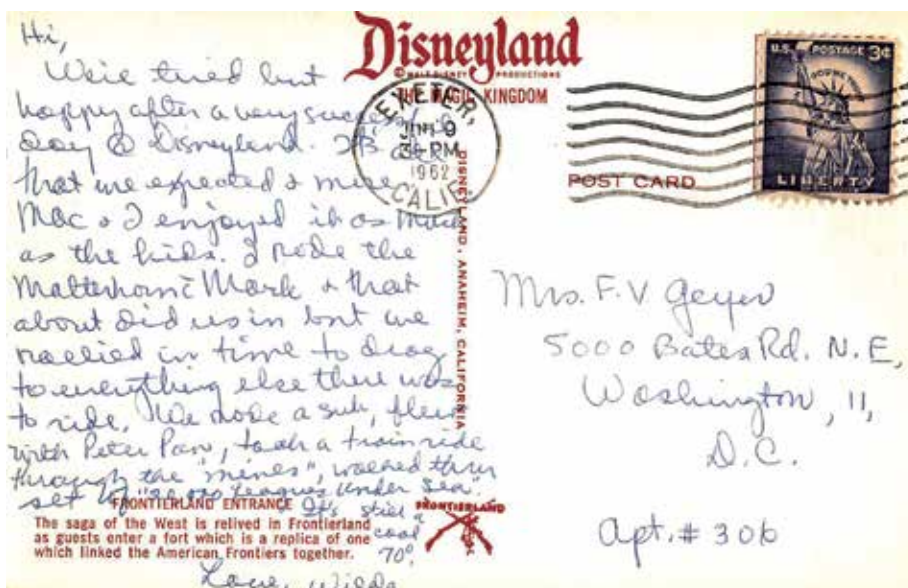
We're tired but happy after a very successful day @ Disneyland. It's all that we expected & more. Mac & I enjoyed it as much as the kids. I rode the Matterhorn with Mark and that about did us in but we rallied in time to drag to everything else there was to ride. We rode a sub, flew with Peter Pan, took a train ride through the "mines," walked thru the set of "20,000 Leagues Under the Sea." It's still a cool 70F.

Love, Wilda

The woman's story of their Disneyland adventures was epigrammatic, and full of brio. I wanted to jump on the next plane to Disneyland just to shake hands with these swashbuckling travelers, swept up in the magic of the amusement park. In sharing their adventures in Disneyland with their loved ones back home, they were sharing the deepest meaning of their lives in that moment. And they were teaching me why sharing our special moments in life with our loves ones makes us more human, makes us more fully alive.



Facebook. Instagram. Twitter. Our new age digital gods of communication. Snap a photo of your travel adventures. Text it. Post it on Facebook. Share it with hundreds or thousands of your digital "friends." Our digital world makes it all so easy to stay in



touch. But do we really touch anyone in any meaningful way when we touch the send button on our iPhones?

These digital images and messages flutter across our screens like butterflies in a windstorm, grabbing our attention but not our hearts. Unlike the carefully-crafted postcards of yesteryear, the never-ending deluge of digital messages and photos pouring across “social media” channels today amount to little more than fodder for a satiated, often bored and disconnected society.

As I slide my fingers across the letters, “the Magic Kingdom,” emblazoned on the top of the postcard I’m clutching in my hand, I realize I’m touching the tender memories and written conversations of the most treasured moments in people’s lives – people now gone but not forgotten. All these old postcards aren’t just relics in an antique store. As a storyteller, they’re my means of transport to a more graceful and charming era – a time when people took the time to share the cherished moments of their lives in a meaningful way: by sending a postcard.

“Send us a postcard when you get there,” amounted to an affectionate entreaty to a loved one -- to share their memorable travel experiences with the folks back home who truly cared about the traveler’s happiness and safety en route to their destination.

I thanked Wally for his help and left the antique store that day with a 2-inch stack of postcards and no idea what I was going to do with them. I brought them home, and placed them in a box on a bookcase shelf. But the postcards refused to remain silent. They kept filling my head with questions. *Who were these people? What happened to them? Are any of them still alive?*



A few months later, I moved myself and my box of postcards to Denton in pursuit of a master’s degree in journalism. During my first class, my professor spoke about the art and craft of writing about people – “characters,” he called them. Our job as journalists, he said, is to unveil “the mystery and deepest meaning” of characters we encounter in the world. The professor’s words hit me like a lightning bolt.

After class that evening, I quickly plucked my box of postcards from high up on my bookcase shelf. Each one held an intriguing mystery, a story in search of a storyteller. That storyteller, I now knew, was me. I examined my postcards more carefully, noticing important facts and clues about the people sending and receiving the postcards that I had overlooked in my haste to possess them and bring them home with me last summer.

Suddenly, I realized that the Frannie V. Geyer who received the New York postcard at her home in Topeka, Kansas, was the same “Mrs. F.V. Geyer” who received the Disneyland postcard at her new home in



Shirley Legg, Frances’ daughter, on a trip to Mexico City

Washington D.C. Through the mystery of my postcards, I felt Frannie was beckoning me to tell her story. Why did she move a 1,000 miles away from her home in Topeka? I wondered.

I began a frantic search for Frannie’s story. The Internet offered some answers. An obituary of Dr. Charles “Mac” Geyer, a radiologist who lived in Wichita Falls, Texas with his wife, Wilda, revealed that Mac died in 2005 at the age of 89. Mac’s mother was the late Frances Groves Geyer. Thanks to Mac’s obituary and the Internet, I located the name and phone number of a relative of Frances Geyer: Shirley Legg, Frannie’s daughter (and Mac’s sister), who lived in Kansas City, Missouri.

I was short of breath and my stomach felt queasy when I dialed the person I hoped would be Frannie’s daughter. A woman with a soft, almost lyrical voice picked up the phone.

“Hi, I’m Jesika Fisher. I’m doing a story about a woman named Frances Geyer. Are you by any chance related to her?”

Her voice was warm, but suspicious.

“Yes, I’m her daughter, Shirley.”

I told Shirley about a New York City postcard I found in an antique store in Wichita Falls that a Don and Emma had sent to her mother. Don and Emma somehow knew about Frannie’s interest in acquiring a Volvo. During their East Coast travels, Don and Emma noted they had spotted a lot of Volvos, and were considering purchasing one for Frannie. “Grandma Special!” Don deadpanned.

Shirley didn’t know Don and Emma, or anything about their offer to buy her mother a Volvo. But she did know that their promise to bring back a Volvo from the East Coast for Frannie wasn’t consummated. Frannie acquired her own Volvo, Shirley said, a sporty white sedan that helped cement her mother’s enduring reputation as “spunky.”



THE POWER OF WORDS

“She was very proud of herself because it was a big deal for someone to buy a Volvo, a ‘Swedish car,’ in those days,” Shirley said.

Talking to Shirley helped resolve at least part of the mystery surrounding Frannie – something about her personality, about her daring do. But I wanted to know so much more about this woman, Frances (not Frannie) V. Geyer, who I first met through a postcard. I asked Shirley to persuade her sister-in-law, Wilda, the author of the Disneyland postcard, to speak to me. Shirley didn’t want to call Wilda. But she said she’d write her a letter urging her to take my call. “Most people don’t do it anymore,” Shirley said. But she and Wilda had been exchanging letters for years.

Like writing postcards, I thought. By writing Wilda a carefully crafted letter, in longhand, you’re letting her know that even though you don’t see her often, you care – deeply-- about her.

I thanked Shirley for her help with my story, and I scheduled a date to call her again soon.



A few weeks before I called Shirley, I drove back to Wichita Falls to see if I could find any more postcards written to or from Frannie Geyer. I didn’t find any. When I left the antique store I asked Wally to give me a call if he came across more postcards with Frances V. Geyer’s name on them but I didn’t really expect to hear from Wally again.

I was wrong. Shortly after talking to Shirley, I got a phone call from the antique store. I recognized Wally’s gravelly voice immediately. “There’s this lady here in the store who was lookin’ at postcards and found two of ‘em with the same name,” **Frances Geyer**



Wally said.

“I recognized the name of the lady you were lookin’ for. We got to searchin’ and right now I’m looking at ten (postcards) with Frances V. Geyer’s name on them.”

A few days later I left Denton to drive 101 miles back to the Corner Emporium in Wichita Falls. Wally was on the phone when I stepped through the door. When he saw me, he hung up the phone and reached behind the counter. “I think we found a little more than when I spoke to you,” Wally grinned coyly as he pulled out a stack of postcards about two inches thick.

Gazing at the stack of postcards Wally handed me, I became flabbergasted, almost giddy. *What am I holding in my hand?* I wondered. The Holy Grail...the postcards that could finally unscramble the great mystery of Frances Geyer... the deepest meaning of her life...the people and places that mattered most to her?

Wally proudly held up a slightly ripped postcard with the illustration of a dark-haired woman riding a horse while firing a pistol into the air. It was addressed to Frances Groves, Frances’ maiden name. The postage mark read 1908.

Wally explained that Smith Walker, the Corner Emporium’s landlord, had purchased the building a few years ago. Smith found the Geyer Family postcards in a box covered with dust on the third floor of his building. Hoping to make some money, he brought the box of postcards to Wally.

I began counting the postcards that had been stuffed inside that shoebox. Ten, twenty, thirty...I was still flipping when Wally got a hold of Smith on the phone.

“It’s that girl who’s writin’ a story about the postcards you’re sellin’,” I heard him say as I counted. It seems I had become a minor celebrity in the shop.

Wally paused.

“How many does she have so far? I don’t know, she’s still countin’!”

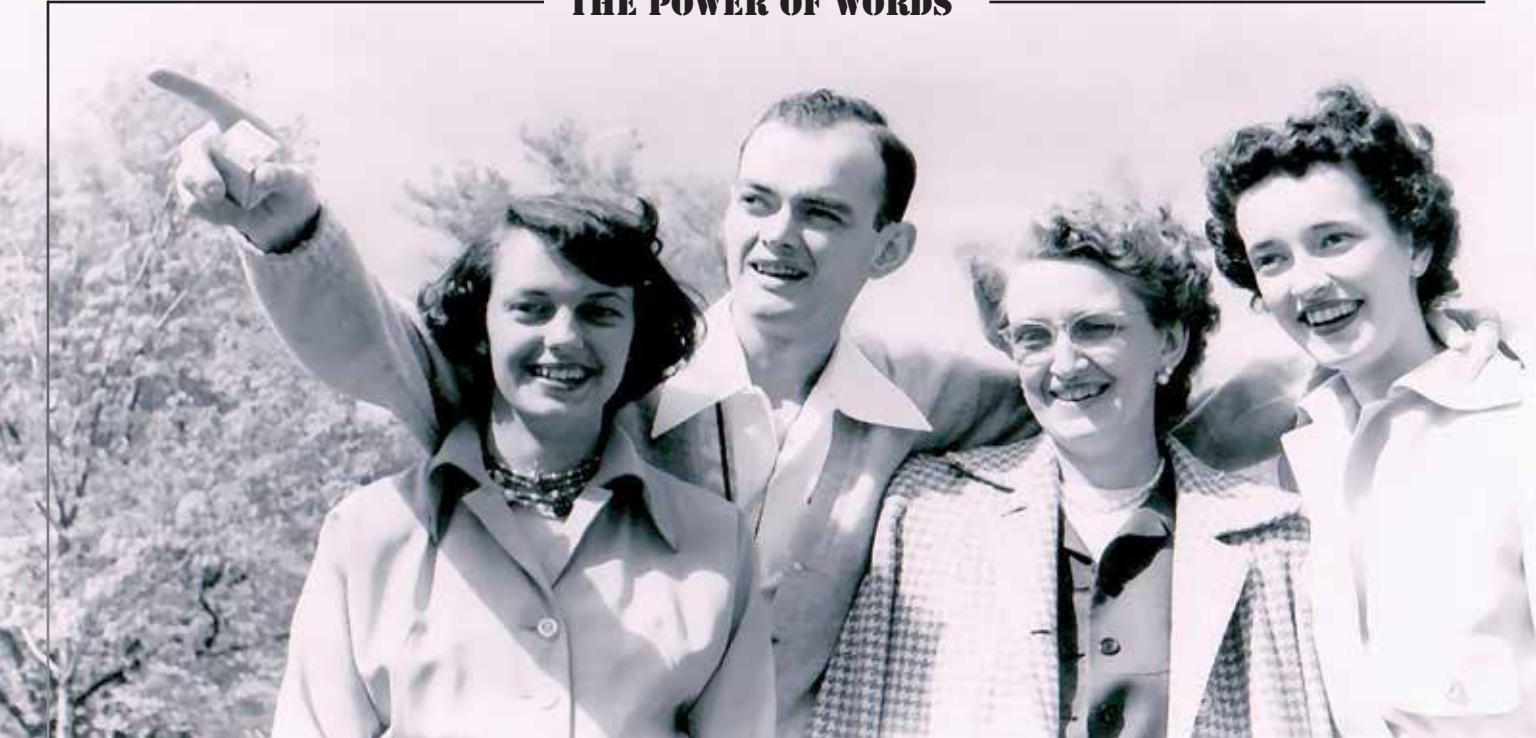
“Seventy-eight,” I said, catching my breath.

Wally told me that Smith wanted to talk to me. I plunked down sixty dollars on the counter for the postcards and thanked Wally for hunting down the valuable stash of Geyer Family postcards. I just had to show off my trophies from my postcard hunting adventures with someone who I knew would care about my discoveries. That was my mother.

I dashed over to the local hospital where Mom works as a medical coder, and invited her to lunch. I could hardly contain my excitement. Before I could even swallow a bite of my chicken salad, I pulled out a white paper bag stuffed with what was at that moment the most precious property I owned: my postcards.

“Jesika, this is amazing,” my mom gushed.

We spent the rest of our lunch ignoring our salads, totally immersed



Shirley Legg, Dr. Charles "Mac" Geyer, Frances Geyer, Fran Geyer

in a world that, we both felt, seemed more charming, more intimate and more joy-filled than our own. As we said goodbye, I promised Mom I'd come back to Wichita Falls – with my postcards – soon. She said she could hardly wait to see me and my postcards again.

The next day, I called Shirley to tell her about the new trove of postcards about the Geyer Family that Wally found in Wichita Falls. She was just as enthused and surprised as I was. Shirley speculated that Mac had probably taken the postcards with him after they cleaned out Frances' apartment. But she had no idea how the postcards had ended up in the office building. *Maybe Smith Walker would know.*



Smith had a throaty voice that sounded like air passing through a Brillo pad. He explained that the office he'd cleaned out had been occupied by a doctor. The family cleaned up his office after the doctor retired, but left the box. "They didn't want it," he said.

Most of the postcards in the shoebox circulated in the 1960s. Some of the postcards were dispatched and received over the span of a few days, others took months. I also discovered cards from the 1970s, a few from the 1980s, and one from 1989, six years before Frances's death.

Some postcards had found their way around the world -- from India to Ireland. But most of the cards circulated within the United States. "The family always sent postcards wherever they went," Shirley told me. "It was just what people did in those days."

In his postcards Don, Frances's son-in-law, felt the need to share his life on the road with Frances. Attending a seminar or eating alone in a roadside diner, Don would send Frances a postcard. He often described how much he missed his wife, also named Frances. "My Fran," he called her.

So I was surprised, and somewhat disappointed, to learn about Don and Fran's divorce in the early 1970s. "It took her 7 years to divorce him," Shirley said. Don died of a brain tumor in 1977, shortly after the divorce. The divorce and the brain tumor were not the kind of news I wanted to hear as I explored the life and times of Frances and her family.

Through a steady stream of postcards arriving in her mailbox from Mac and Wilda, Frances kept abreast of their many family road trips across the country. "We had a map on the wall in the kitchen in the house in the breakfast room. It was 3x4 feet and framed," Lisa, Wilda and Mac's daughter, said. "Dad would take a fountain pen, and draw the highway lines," she continued, tracing an imaginary path with her fingers.

Almost a year after discovering the postcards in the Wichita Falls antique store, I found myself driving down a tree-lined street in Kansas City, Missouri. As I pulled up to a two-story, white house with dark green shutters, an older woman with short white hair and a blue button up shirt came out to greet me. Shirley had moved into the house two years after her marriage in 1961. She was now 88.

We spent the day reminiscing, flipping through my postcards and her photo albums until we came to a series of photos in black and white and color of a tropical paradise, complete with an ocean blue lagoon and a pyramid. In one photo, Shirley's wearing a sky blue dress.

"Is this during your honeymoon?"

I'd discovered a postcard Shirley had sent them among the pile that mentioned their trip to the pyramids.

Shirley nodded.

Shirley's husband, Bob, strolled into the room and shook my hand. He wore a long sleeved, red and black plaid shirt. His closely-cropped, dirty blond hair that I'd seen in the photo albums Shirley showed me had all but disappeared.

I showed him the postcard that Shirley had sent her

The family always sent postcards wherever they went. It was just what people did in those days.

SHIRLEY LEGG

mother about her honeymoon. Bob was unable to read the faded writing, and asked Shirley to do it.

“Do you remember that, Bob?” Shirley asked.

“Nope,” Bob replied.

“I remember those hats,” Shirley said, pointing to matching hats they were wearing. “They were so itchy.”



I imagined Frances living vicariously through her children’s travels, remembering each trip by re-reading every word. No wonder Frances kept her postcards until her death in 1995. She had moved those 1,000 miles from Topeka to Washington, D.C. to be closer to her daughter, I discovered.

I realize, of course, that postcards are a dying medium, mementos from days gone by that live on inside boxes in attics, basements, or antique stores now, their once bright and shiny technicolor pictures of landmarks and attractions slowly fading with time.

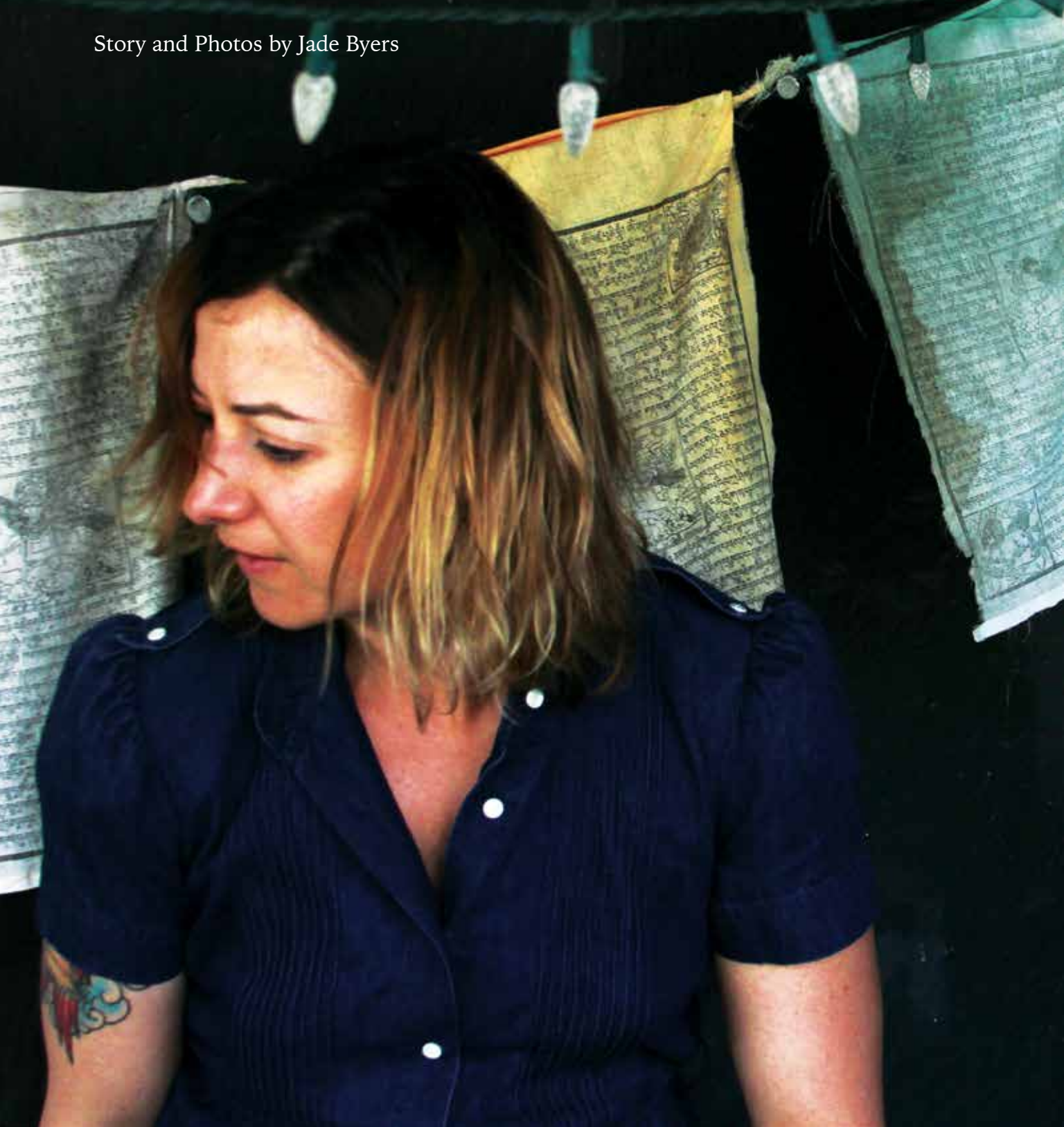
But for me, my box of postcards are a cherished form of communication. I’ll need them now, more than ever, to remind me of the magic of travel, of the intimacy of family, and of the most primal need we humans share: to stay in touch. If I ever stop feeling the wonder of walking through Disneyland or driving across the Brooklyn Bridge in a snow-white Volvo, I’ll know where to recapture that magic: In my box of postcards.



Clockwise, from top left: Shirley in 1961, Shirley poses for a quick shot, Shirley’s husband Bob is shown on one of their many travels, the view from Shirley’s hotel during her honeymoon to Mexico City.

Goodnight at the Lost Horse Saloon

Story and Photos by Jade Byers



Universal storytelling from the middle of nowhere

It's Monday night and the drive from El Paso started out hypnotizing, the wind sorcerer conjuring up dirt cyclones to dance on the desert's horizon. Despite the cinematic scenery, the ride is already pressing my patience an hour in. There is a strategy to road trips I don't really get other than the shared sense—don't become roadkill. I arrive in Marfa just after 10 p.m.

The Texas border town sits 30.3095 degrees north and 104.0206 degrees west. It's like most small Texas towns: country bars, a main street, an isolated stop light that dictates the proclivities of the lawman. Except this one is different Marfa is an artistic alternative for well-intentioned travelers and scene-stealing outsiders. It's also home to freelance writer Rachel Monroe.

Her stories are a Greyhound bus full of experience. Strangers, family members, rumors—all paving the way for new copy. She is immersive, often bordering on obsessive, when it comes to writing. "Have You Ever Thought about Killing Someone?" is a piece she spent the better part of a year on. Exploring fetishism and the loneliness of a man obsessed with his own murder. Rachel explains this thoroughly and through the eyes of his killer. "If he had known then what he knows today, thanks to more than a decade spent among the perverts and neo-Nazis and idiots and masterminds of federal prison, Mike Baker would have been able to tell exactly what Doc was the first time he set eyes on him. That's one thing you can say about being locked up: It's a great way to learn about human nature."

Rachel sits shotgun in the rented sedan as I roll toward Hotel Paisano. "That was a good stop." She explains Sheriff Mitch and his zeal to pull

I always felt like I was faking it a little bit, writing short stories. Also, I never really wanted to read short stories, which is a dead giveaway. Once I was finished with grad school and I didn't have assignments due, I didn't feel particularly motivated to write fiction. But I was still writing long journal entries, just writing for myself, about my feelings and what I was thinking about.

RACHEL MONROE

over unsuspecting drivers for not heeding the four-way stoplight. We just left her house. Its decor is bohemian country; prayer flags and strung lights inherited from her landlord adorn the entrance. The fridge is cleverly disguised with pictures, postcards and fruit magnets. A holiday card that exclaims, "HAPPY WINTER I CARE FOR YOU SO HERE IS SOME USELESS TRASH." A subtle descriptor that dictates a slice of my host's personality. Rachel is a romantic realist. "I guess it's just kind of how my mind works. I grew up in the suburbs on the East Coast, and I want to live in rural West Texas. Not that that is entirely representative, but in some ways it is. It makes the world feel safer and also bigger when I can make friends at the fire department and connect with people outside my comfort zone. Learning to inhabit different points of view."

Her flip phone vibrates as I sit at her dining table. She offers me a La Croix. I'm nervy and start rambling about my mother's long-form text messages about her aunt who was apparently the first female and Hispanic bank manager in Marfa. Rachel wants to go to the bank and check out the story, but they are closing soon. Imagine Rachel always in this tone. She is a curious cat. It is the way she navigates the experience of others—prowling around for stimuli. She writes book reviews that read like subtly adapted movie treatments. She supplements her income through financial copywriting and hotel critiques. Finds time to volunteer at the local fire department and ride motorcycles. Freelancing isn't for the faint of heart.

Thick arched entryways guard the hotel's courtyard—it's old west Texas reinterpreting Spanish colonial. The wind has had its way with her hair; it's tangled and separated in pieces falling just above her shoulders. She wears a denim dress with cap sleeves that puff up around her shoulders, a colorful tattoo peeking out on her right arm. She is an inch or so shy of six feet tall and stacked proportionately. Her beauty is supplemental to her conversation. She is a natural at both. I hit record and Rachel immediately worries the fountain noise will overwhelm the conversation. I am unconcerned; she backtracks. "Oh well, it's fine."



Careful consideration is the crux of her living. She told me about when she was in grad school and lived at The Bell Foundry, the Baltimore arts building. She and a group of friends created the space as a kind of Pee-wee's Playhouse for theater and artsy types. A labyrinth of wood pallet stairs, freezing floors and the overwhelming stench of cat pee were the stomping grounds for these well-spent youths. "This place was quite raw; we could turn it into anything. We had a reading series in the basement for awhile. It was an interesting time in my life."

Marfa is now home. It's a town that celebrates esoteric luxuries and for many occupants the expectations of a rock and hard place. Even so, it's best known for the artistic energy it projects. This place is kind to Rachel, and the feeling is mutual. However, the incongruity of the town's experience now and pre-artistic enclave is ambient. I grew up under a similar Texas sky in a small town aware of its privilege and plight. When you are accustomed to the former, the latter seems less obvious. Not for Rachel though. I imagine there are many things that keep her eyes open on those clear nights where every living thing in the desert is haunting for other living things, including her own thoughts. On

occasion revisiting that one thought, the inescapable irony of Marfa. She intercedes deliberately, her Texas Monthly reporting gives voice to the experience of West Texas living.

The margaritas are shockingly steadfast in the Texas heat. The bipolar clouds are playing hide-and-seek with the sun. Rachel tells me about her complications with reporting and how she, even now, after being named a "Queen of Nonfiction" among 56 female journalists to read by New York Magazine, hasn't convinced herself worthy of the description. "I didn't and still often don't feel like I know what I'm doing. I didn't go to journalism school, right?... I went to school for fiction."

She is permanently in her head. A life of the mind is a tricky condition for writers; it can assure your legacy or you can completely lose yourself in it. Rachel, to be sure, lives in both these realities. Never taking herself too seriously but taking the artfulness of writing serious enough. "I have to, in a way, get myself in that weird defensive, not defensive, that slightly cynical stance. Because I always end up liking people and seeing things from their point of view—this is a real struggle."

Striking a balance after grad school offered a strange clarity. "As for fiction... I always felt like I was faking it a little bit, writing short stories. Also, I never really wanted to read short stories, which is a dead give-away. Once I was finished with grad school and I didn't have assignments due, I didn't feel particularly motivated to write fiction. But I was still writing long journal entries, just writing for myself, about my feelings and what I was thinking about." These pieces explore insecurities, but pre-emo, it's more similar to 90s grunge—wickedly vulnerable. The net offered a kind of go-between traditional non-fiction and first-person essay writing. "You could write non-fiction that was literary and self-aware but about a subject beyond just yourself and your own experiences."

Rachel's audible thinking compliments the conversation. The quickened "huh" and deep-throated "mmm" precede long pauses and antsy beginnings of sounded-out thoughts. She always finds her stride ruminating on, not merely reacting, to the questions. We talk about brothers and firefighting.

Rachel Monroe is keen to tell the sordid lives we live with. "I get a real



thrill... I mean it's not universal as in it-doesn't-always-happen that way. But being able to make a connection or see somebody's perspective who I thought I couldn't feels really good, like a good stretch does." The goal is rather matter of fact. Seeking that very moment of ordering the world into something tangible, morphing human complexity into something relatable—a story.

We discussed the functionality of reporting long-form pieces. The uncertainty of what is expected and what actually is. "I generally don't go and report something if I don't know where it's going to live, if that makes sense. Even if I don't have an assignment, because you know your brain is angled in that way, you're shaping it as you're living it." Refueling her intrigue through the curiosities of life.

I tell Rachel we had to pitch our writers. She is amused by this discovery. "That makes me feel funny in a good way." Her modesty is exacting. A nascent feeler, Rachel is a refreshing chat. The iffy sky is turning on itself, the mix of pink and orange are toning down into something ominous, and the wind is picking up. We move inside. It's quieter, and she is counseling me on her Marfa Public Radio interviews of Lannon writers. "I feel embarrassed you have listened to those interviews. I've gotten so much better."

We gossip a little. The desert offers tranquility with that isolation from the presupposed lit scene. Anyway, Rachel isn't lonely when she is alone. She is at her best. Loyla Pierson, her former roommate at the Foundary, explained Rachel's tendency for isolation and her instinct for a story. "You end up getting a lot of space with Rachel. She is an immediately engaging person. She is very much herself so it is very easy to know her and some ways it's impossible to know her." A state of arrival that many people wait their entire lives for. On the one hand, fleeing from the inevitable truth of how solitary life really is, on the other, chasing the chance to explore one's self-awareness. This is the guile of art and muse to feel and to create a story that is entirely your own.

She invites me to dinner with she and her brother Alex, who just got into town. We meet at Stellina, one of the few restaurants open on a Tuesday night. A long rectangular bar fills the space; it's like a dinner table with the middle cut out. People surround all sides, unminding shoulders touching each other. We are exchanging introductions and brother and sister are adjusting to one another. A woman from across the room is eyeing us. Not us, Rachel. This woman has all the trappings of a Marfa transplant or a traveling hipster. Her wavy windblown hair falls carelessly around her shoulders, along with a strategically placed scarf and a backpack that hangs off her shoulder. She motions for Rachel. They recognize each other at what

seems to be the exact same moment. Rachel wanders over. I'm panting with excitement. Alex seems aloof to it all. Rachel comes back with a story.

The woman is in fact traveling. She met Rachel last year while working at a bookstore in Missoula, Montana. Rachel was doing a reading from a story she wrote about smokejumpers. The two hit it off. The woman, also named Rachel, had mentioned she was going on a long road trip with her boyfriend. Naturally, Rachel invited her to Marfa. "Seven months later, there they were," Rachel added.

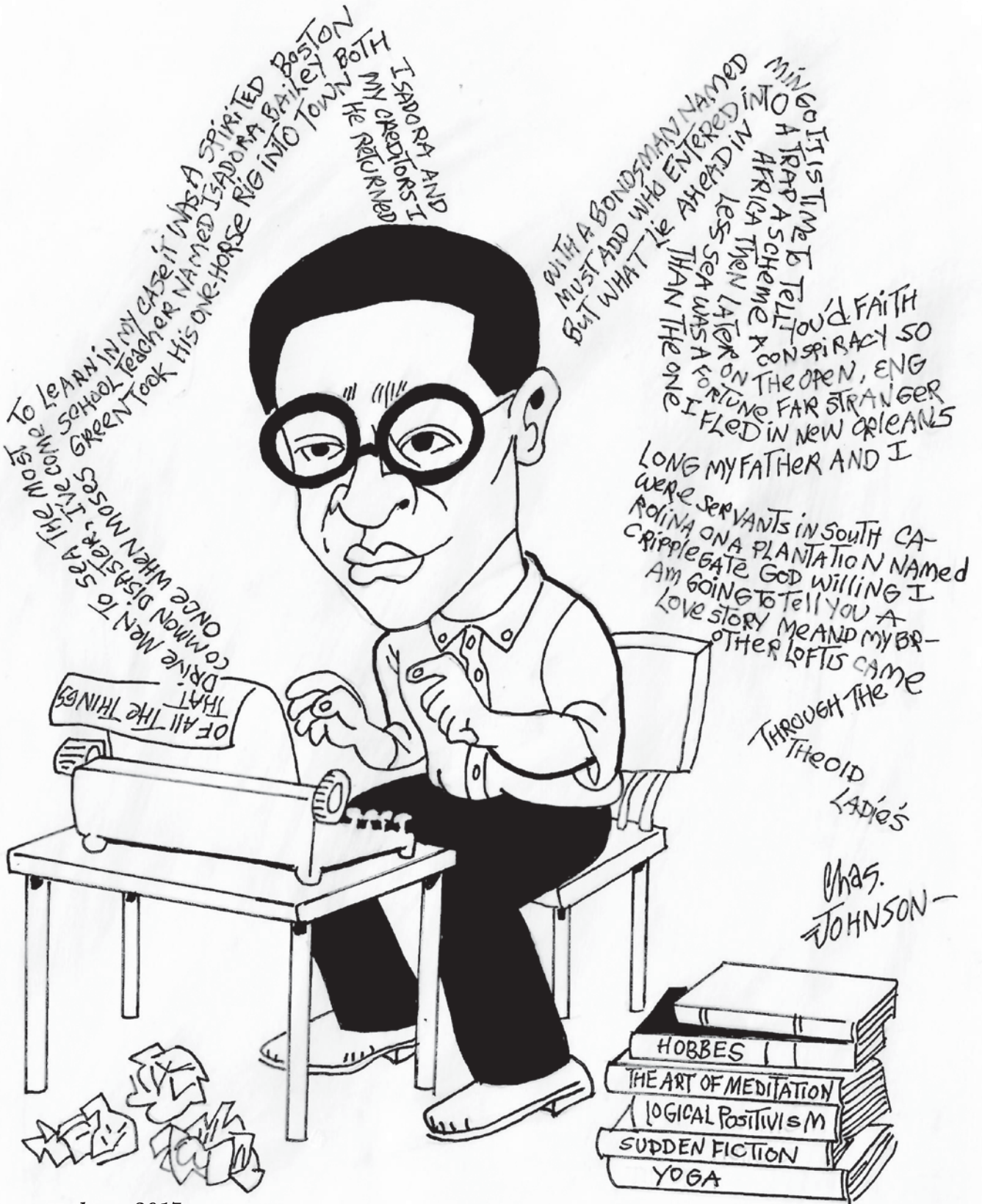
Life is random, and Rachel is a friend to strangers.

We end up meeting the couple at the Lost Horse Saloon. The familiar red Lonestar beer bottle caps make up the walkway. It's typical of a saloon minus the wood floors. These floors are less resolute, uneven and seem on the verge of giving way in certain areas. The bar stools are the definition of kitsch—the effigies of a gal's legs and ass offer an optical illusion. It works well as I adjust my eyes, spotting Rachel and her friend at the bar.

She orders a ranch water rich with tequila, topo chico and lime. I copy her and start feeling like the little sister tagging along. Luckily, her actual little sibling is here—Alex. He is tall like his sister and handsome in a teen soap opera kind of way, in that he could play a teen in a soap opera despite being almost 30. The swagger of the boy next door, he is polite and talkative. He explains why, like his parents, he became a doctor. Rachel rarely gets mentioned. I don't know if that's me or him. He is six years her junior and the two of them seem like loving strangers as grown siblings often do.

After about an hour and a few more ranch waters, we are all sitting on the patio chatting about the state of America. Rachel roasts Alex a bit over his music taste. They are warming up, and I'm front row. The hazy sky and strung lights overhead are the only thing between us and the brilliant stars. I keep looking up, just one more night of that starry blanket will suffice, but the dirty desert is in cahoots with the wind again. As the conversation starts becoming streams of consciousness, I miss our talk. Rachel leans forward hanging onto the words of others, observing the chemistry. A rare and sly smile stretches across her face. Another story is building.

THE POWER OF WORDS



Word Limits

Charles Johnson, a man of letters and immense kindness, says there's only so much language can do. The rest is a great mystery.

Story by Leah E. Waters -- Illustrations courtesy of Charles Johnson

“Let me look at the prose.” Charles Johnson picks up the paperback, warped with secondhand overuse, examines its cover through his professorial eyewear, noting the New York Times Bestseller sticker, and reads from the prologue, mumbling unintelligibly, thoughtfulness and maybe a little skepticism marking his face.

When he speaks again with a smooth tenor and the whisper of smoke on his breath, the punctuated consonants and soft clarity are from a man well accustomed to lecture halls and hushed chats alike.

“It’s not bad.”

A phrase more magnanimous than truthful, said with unmistakable cheer and sincerity. I had a quiet suspicion it was more for my friend’s benefit than any other. She had been reading it in a quiet alcove, hand steeped on her cheek, when Johnson and I walked up a moment ago. He asked to see the book. She obliged, wide-eyed and nervous.

The book under scrutiny: a romance novel-turned Hollywood hit, a weekend read for working moms and, what some might call “literary pork”

And yet.

The Johnson standing in the bookstore—where not a small shelf held his prize-winning works of philosophical fiction—speaks with kind necessity of the words on the page, the author who

wrote them, and more pointedly, to my friend from whose hands he plucked the dog-eared pop novel a moment ago.

Johnson, the 1990 winner of the National Book Award for Middle Passage, the recipient of MacArthur and Guggenheim Fellowships, a scholar, artist, teacher and philosopher, is a man of letters. He is also a man of great kindness, and I would soon come to learn, of great mystery.



Okay, so stick with us here.

The universe—and the people who inhabit it—is a great and fascinating enigma. Say the entire cosmos is a dark, galactic puzzle made of 100 pieces, a jigsaw of relative knowns and unknowns yet-to-be-discovered.

Cosmologists, experts in this macrocosm of existence, say only five of those pieces are observable, with corners and colors, shape and definition, things we can see and touch and taste.

Dark matter occupies 23 pieces of the whole. The last remaining 72 pieces—a sweeping majority by any standards—is dark energy, a mystifying form believed to be responsible for accelerating the expansion of the universe.

Johnson—eyes alive with wonder, hands open and moving—does his best to describe this to me. Me with

my notepad and pen and eyes focused, hoping to capture whatever pieces I can of the man across from me.

“I believe we live in the midst of A Great Mystery.” He says this the way someone might about an obvious secret, a paradox in plain sight.

I am writing a story about this man—a dreamer who looks at the stars and wonders. You’d think, with the 300 published interviews and his mighty collection of short stories, novels, screenplays, essays and illustrations, that there is little left of Charles Johnson to explore.

You’d be wrong, of course.

Johnson is a top-shelf enigma, and much like the cosmos, a brilliant puzzle. What follows is but one piece. A truth, not *the* truth, as far I see it. Minutes before Johnson arrived for our afternoon chat, I sipped the last wash of tepid coffee, my fingers finding a phrase in *The Way of the Writer* I had underlined twice in red pen: “And every story is a transcendental object, i.e. an aesthetic object brought into being (our experience) by sustained acts of consciousness.”

This is the Johnson I’m interviewing. I thought I’d squeeze in one last minutiae of insight to add to my already exhaustive list of questions I hoped no one has asked him before. I felt desperately inadequate to write

a story—transcendental or not—about a man who uses “oeuvre” and “aesthetic” like salt and pepper.

“This isn’t helping my heart rate.”

“The coffee?” My friend Kayla looked up from across the table, book in hand.

“The reading.” I pushed aside the stack of books—all Johnson’s—and decided just to stare at Seattle in spring outside the window.

Lucky for me, he’s a delightful conversationalist.

The same man met me by a stack of clearance paperbacks ten minutes later eager to escape the day’s most recent dilemma: Charles Johnson’s Facebook was hacked this morning.

“And I had to clean up dog poop, too.” Johnson has two dogs, well past 15 years old, both of whom leave him inconvenient messes.

The hacking, by way of his descriptions, is less a hack and more a cat-fish, virtual imposters disguised as Johnson’s Facebook friends seeking naivete wherever it can be found. Needless to say, Johnson’s plight is disarming. I calm down, laughing away the last tremors of tension.

He orders a small drip coffee from the soft-spoken adolescent across the counter, leaning in, hand to his left ear to make out the price (\$2.76). We find a corner table in the downstairs pub, below Third Place Books, a bright and lively space perched on a hill in the quiet neighborhood of Ravenna. The city today is an incongruous spectacle of emerald vitality and urban efficiency, the flowering trees and rows of houses nestled together, Johnson and I somewhere in their midst.

He speaks with hands twined together, the thin, braided gold wedding band on his left nearly touching the thick, handcrafted ring on his right. A Nine Planets ring plated with Gibeon Meteorite with colored gemstones spaced around the band like the inner planets of the solar system. Jupiter had fallen out, a shallow crater where the opal used to be.

At that table, where the yellowed light overhead falls over his face, Johnson tells me stories of his life, the parts that make up the piece I see before me.



Johnson was born in 1948 in Evanston, Illinois, a town founded by Methodist ministers nearly 100 years prior, 12 miles from Chicago’s center, bordered on the east by Lake Michigan—known also as “Heavenston” for the easy life people made there. Wealthy Evanstonians worked in Chicago and lived by the lake, funnelling money into a school system that ranked one of the highest in the nation at the time, of which Johnson was a grateful recipient.

“It was very progressive in the sense that the high school I went to, my mother had went to in the ‘30s. So it was integrated. I grew up with kids, white and black. It was just the way the world was as far as I could understand it.”

Black people from Chicago understood it differently, so said a woman Johnson met at a book signing.

“She said ‘that’s where the uppity black people live.’ And they were uppity.” Johnson laughed quick and full, both amused and resigned.

Black families in Evanston at the time came by work as domestics for wealthy white families. Others, like Johnson’s great uncle, were tradesmen. His father’s uncle left South Carolina for Evanston in the 20s to work as a general contractor, starting an all-black construction company. He was also the town’s first black milkman.

“I grew up in a place where I could literally see my family’s industry and creativity on the street. It’s just all over the place. My grandmother’s house is across the street from Springfield Baptist Church that my great uncle built. When I’d sit on the front porch, I’d be looking at his handiwork.”

His great uncle built residences, apartment buildings, churches along the north shore, and even his own home that sat atop a beauty parlor and barber shop. When Johnson as a child would visit that place, his great uncle, a man born around the turn of the century, would study the news on television.

BET YOU DIDN'T KNOW...

> Johnson likes omelets, solitude and soft instrumental jazz.

> Before he was paid to write professionally, Johnson would crank out term papers for his undergrad friends on the weekend for a \$5 flat fee: “Money back guaranteed. If they failed to get an ‘A.’ I never had to return those payments, and the assignments I did for them meant later I would become a writer and they wouldn’t.”

> Johnson joined a martial arts school in Chicago during the time of the Dojo wars in the city. At his best, Johnson could throw 45 punches in 10 seconds, front, side and back, his friends in his dorm timing him with a stopwatch.

> Johnson sits in formal meditation daily, perched on the pillow he has used since his commitment to Buddhism in 1981: “There’s a lot of meditation energy in that cushion. And when I stand up from that, I’m totally clear. I’m totally right here, right now. You should still have that meditative consciousness when you’re off the pillow, when I’m doing anything, when I’m washing and drying the dishes, when I’m picking up dog poop, when I’m talking to you. All through my day, I should have that consciousness that I get when I sit formally.”



Johnson's standards.

Joan met Johnson during his second summer as a garbage man. Johnson was deep into Nietzsche the day two friends from high school knocked on his door and told him about a girl he had to meet. The cousins of Johnson's friends, ones he had grown up with, had met a girl at their church and she had been staying with them that summer. He was a little curious but mostly wanted to catch up with the girls he hadn't seen in years.

"As I walk in the door, and his cousins are there, and there's this 20-year-old girl sitting on the couch with this great big beaming smile and I thought 'Jesus, this is it. This is her. I don't have to look anymore.'"

The pair dated that summer and married at 22, Joan in a homemade dress and Charles in a rented tux.

Soon after the stories of family have been told, our talk turns to writing, its uninhibited power and its limitations.



I glance down at my phone on the table, checking first that the recording hasn't failed and second to see how much time we'd spent together. Nearly an hour, but Johnson is still eager to talk and listen. What remains of Johnson's coffee sits forgotten to the side. My water is gone, ice and a lonely lemon in its place.

We turn to words, our shared craft a topic of endless speculation and mystery. For a man who has spent his life's work in the midst of words, Johnson has a

"And he'd tell us kids, 'Get an education. That's the only thing that ever held me back.' And I took that to heart."

Indeed he did. A Bachelor's in Journalism and a Master's in Philosophy at Southern Illinois University. Then a PhD in Philosophy from SUNY Stony Brook. But before all that, during a time when black men were workmen, not artists, Johnson drew cartoons, something his father said just wasn't done.

Johnson collected his first professional dollar at age 17 for his drawings. He published hundreds of illustrations, some for his high school newspaper, others for the *Chicago Tribune*, and ultimately curated a collection of drawings of the racially satirical variety in *Black Humor*.

But any earnings he got from his drawings were a far cry from covering all the tuition and fees of college education. So when Johnson came back to Evanston for the summer, he needed money. His father, the most moral man he's ever known, found him a job.

Johnson's father spoke quietly but with conviction.

"You should set your clock early."

"Why?" The 19-year-old Johnson was skeptical.

"Because you have a job."

"Oh? What's this job?"

"You're going to be a garbage man."

Johnson's father worked for the city of Evanston as a night watchman. The city also hired students over the summer as garbage men.

"He just walked down the hallway and signed me up."

And for two years, Johnson worked with the mingled smells of his own sweat and residential refuse under the summer sun.

"It was physical. We carried garbage on our backs in a big tub. We walked down alleys and poured people's garbage into a big tub and put it on our back and walked it back to the truck. And my dad wanted me

Life is endlessly fascinating. And language doesn't capture it all.

CHARLES JOHNSON

to know the men who did that."

That same summer, Johnson had decided in addition to money, he needed something to spend it on. He told his parents a motorcycle would do. His mother, a deeply religious woman, was terrified with the certain notion it would be the death of her son.

One day, after coming home hot and tired from hauling garbage all morning, Johnson lay down on his bed for a nap.

The sound of his mother's voice shook him from his slumber.

"Your father wants to talk to you."

"Why? About what?"

"He's at the front door." Her non-answer is enough to pull him off the bed and through the house to the front door.

The figure of his father framed the doorway, obscuring the outside.

"Here. These are for you." His father hands him a set of keys and steps away.

Parked by the curb, that summer sun glinting off its gold paint, sat not a motorcycle but a Corvette Convertible. Johnson's father, a man whose own father pulled him from school after fifth grade to work the family farm, bought his son his first car.

Johnson drove that car all the way through college. It would take Johnson and a young student named Joan on many dates together, except for their first when it broke down and he had to call and cancel.

Twelve miles to the south of Evanston, Johnson's wife Joan was born seven days apart from his own entry into the world.

"I joke often that our fathers probably impregnated our mothers at the same moment."

Unlike her husband, Joan lived in South Side Chicago's Altgeld Gardens, one of the nation's first housing projects, encircled by the city's landfills and miles away from a police station. "A very rough place" by

sense of incredulity about them.

"I have spent all my life writing stuff and being immersed in language, and I do it every day. And it's my job. And it's my joy. To create, novels and stories."

Then his face pulls together like a closed fist, pensive and searching.

"But because of meditation practice, I find myself very..." He hesitates, rummaging through his brain for The Right Word. "Gosh, how can I put this... cautious about language and narratives and the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves."

Language, Johnson says, is the child of consciousness, "the flesh of thought." And that skin, though designed to give shape and substance to our inner musings, is not and can never be the experiences themselves.

In Buddhism, a way of living Johnson has subscribed to since 1981, the experience of Awakening is a non-verbal one.

"You cannot describe it. And it's really different for everybody. And there are no ways you can express that in language."

Johnson recalls a Buddhist story in which a finger points at the moon. The moon is truth, and the finger is words.

"That's language. But that's not the moon. It's not the experience. But it can at least point towards it."

I measure those words, recalling that underlined phrase from his book, that stories transcend, springing from our consciousness. I think about this story, his story, and the words, however limited, I might use as a finger and what exactly the moon might be.

"Life is endlessly fascinating. And language doesn't capture it all."

One of those "its" Johnson says words can't capture? Love.

Love, Johnson says, is one of those experiences language simply cannot describe in its entirety.

"Love is inexhaustible, even after the words themselves have all been said."

This coming from a man who once re-supplied his lexicon with an arsenal of words by reading an unabridged, 2,129-page *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary* for serious fun.

"We have to take a step back from that and understand that, as Plato would say in *Timaeus*, 'All of our accounts, even scientific accounts, are a likely story.'"

The likely story, the piece of what I can see, is of a man who saw a hole in the world. Every line and phrase pulled from his consciousness was an attempt to fill that void in literary culture. And fill it he did.

With a painfully accurate historical narrative about a stowaway on an 1830s slave ship.

With an odyssey of humor and suffering in one girl's pursuit of *A Good Thing*.

With an adventure of love and quest for identity for a man born a slave.

With a rich and relatable guide to the art and craft of words on a page.



Among many other things.

The rest of the story, the other 95 percent is out there somewhere, a dark and unexplored place, much like the place in every person, where words cannot touch.

Our time together ends in the late afternoon outside the bookstore where, long after my recorder went dark, Johnson says he has some errands to run, the grocery store namely. Then later he'll go home and lift some weights—his first day of exercise after a two-week stretch without any. Doctor's orders after a tooth extraction, the only outward sign of his age at 69, I suppose.

He signs my copy of *The Way of the Writer* in thin script and narrow swoops of disconnected lettering: "For Leah—with great joy from speaking with you. Charles Johnson."

When I told people I'd be interviewing Charles Johnson for a story, the responses fell into two remarkably distinct camps. "Oh, you mean, *the* Charles Johnson?" and "Does he play football or something?" The former group, who knows the man needs no introduction, were ecstatic, maybe even a little jealous. The latter group, much like my friend Kayla, have never read Johnson before. Or yet, I should say.

Kayla and I begin our goodbyes, graciously thanking Johnson for his time and his kindness. Kayla feels as though she has to apologize for the book she has been reading, as though not reading Charles Johnson when the man himself approaches you is a sin worthy of shame. She says something to that effect, pink with embarrassment.

And Johnson—a man who by all accounts, even the likeliest ones, is serious to the core—leaves us with a phrase and a deep laugh that we soon echo in turn: "At least it wasn't *Fifty Shades of Grey*."

Thank God for small mercies.



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THE POWER OF WORDS



CHEERS TO YOU, GEORGE

Brantley Hargrove earned his bachelor's in journalism at UNT and has since written for magazines like Texas Monthly, D Magazine and Cowboys & Indians and has upcoming features scheduled for upcoming issues of Popular Mechanics and WIRED.. His forthcoming nonfiction book, The Man Who Caught the Storm, is slated for release in Spring 2018 by Simon & Schuster.

Back in 2003, when I first took my seat in an undergrad journalism course, I was immediately certain that George Getschow was unlike any professor I'd ever come across. He still looked every bit the rangy, physical footballer he'd been at Iowa State decades before. He had actually risen to the highest echelons in the subject he taught, managing bureaus for one of the country's most prestigious newspapers. But what distinguished him most from every teacher I'd ever had was this: he challenged me, he expected more from me, and that was a sensation to which I was unaccustomed.

Here was a man who didn't care about grades — who you knew would pass you whether you'd coasted or not, though the weight of his disappointment would be a punishment of its own. He knew editors out there wanted people who could do the work, and that they didn't give a shit about your GPA.

From the start, he treated me like a reporter, not a student. He was always urging me to look at the world around and to see the stories out there, and what they might mean for the future. He had me writing about fracking before the word had even seeped into our common tongue. One of my earliest memories of George is sitting in his class right around the time Baghdad fell. We were watching a live cable news feed as Saddam Hussein's statue pitched over in Firdos Square. He wanted his students to bear witness to history's first draft, which we'd

be writing ourselves soon enough.

He pressed me to be a better reader in order to become a better writer. He helped me shape my first published work, a feature about a student body builder's obsessive regimen that ran in the *NT Daily*. I worked on that story through the semester and into the summer, and George guided me, even though he could just easily have spent that time floating around Lake Grapevine. For him, I think helping me grow was its own reward. I'd never seen that in a teacher before, and I'm sure I'll never see it like again.

We've scrambled over a Native American mound and battleground on the North Texas prairie together, looking for history and for connections to great American literature. It was there, in Archer City, that George showed me how my surroundings and experiences could shape the stories I tell, even if they weren't necessarily about me. I learned to look out, but also within, for the big ones — the projects that could consume years of my life.

School is out for good now, for George and for me. Fourteen years on, we still drink together and talk about writing. He's still the best sounding board I've got when I need to rap about structure. To this day, I always feel better when I share a draft with him before sending it on to the editor, though now the stories are for national magazines and, most recently, a Manhattan book-publishing house. Where I'd be without George's intervention in my life as a writer is one of those unanswerable questions I don't spend too much time thinking about. But I doubt I'd be doing what I am now. I doubt I would have known how to look without as well as within for the biggest story I've told so far.

Cathy Booth Thomas was a correspondent and bureau chief for Time magazine for 22 years. But she claims she didn't learn a thing about writing until she started up Mayborn magazine at UNT in 2008.

I hate seeing George Getschow these days. He's always pestering me to finish my book.

With George cheering me on, I wrote the first chapter for a Mayborn conference workshop back in 2008. I had no idea what I was doing. We used to meet at Big Shucks in East Dallas where we'd settle into a booth with cracked red leather seats and eat grilled fish tacos. George would grill me: What was the underlying theme? Why was I writing the book? Who was my audience? I didn't have a clue. He made me really really uncomfortable. (And no, I'm not removing that "really" from the sentence, George. Quit editing.)

By our third meeting, I was putting on weight but at least I had a theme, thanks to George.

Then he roped me into editing *Denton Live* and *Mayborn* magazine. Not that I knew what narrative nonfiction was. Seven years went by, and I didn't write another word for the book. He didn't prod me. He had his own book he was procrastinating on. We had our plates full.

Every May we met at a Starbucks near his house in Flower Mound and hash out final edits of our students' stories written. He'd arrive with his hair flying in every direction, the very vision of an absent-minded professor. He'd plopp down a stack of student stories with comments scrawled like hasty hieroglyphics across the page. His squiggles would cram the white borders and sneak in between lines and crawl around to the back of a page. You couldn't read a darn thing. But the

very wildness of his appearance -- and his excited comments -- spoke to his passion. It's about the story, dammit. Nothing else matters. Not eating, not sleeping, not combing your hair. The story.

This is the George I love.

I suck at writing nut grafs. In 24 years at Time mag, I think I wrote a dozen nut grafs that made it through the editing process without revision. George, nurtured in the School of *The Wall Street Journal*, is a MASTER of nut grafs. He can take a flimsy story with no seeming direction, just a bunch of lousy facts, and turn it into a narrative gem with a nut graf that summarizes the story and puts it into a larger context. He would sit in workshops with undergrad students and ask questions until the writer found the wider meaning of ... rodeo roping. Seriously.

He was kind, too. I'd send him a pesky edit at 3 or 4 a.m. and he'd email back, Why are you up so late? That, along with a nice fix. Other times, he'd be rude as hell, basically telling me the story sucked and what the heck was I thinking with that lead? Afterwards, he'd always send me a carefully composed note telling me what a great editor I was. He did it to authors, too, hailing their "magnificent essay" or "engaging and well-written" piece, often after a total restructuring of their piece. Once he wrote an author by email: "It's brilliant, bringing tears, raising ghosts, making us feel, making us think -- and thus rising to the level of literature. I bow at the altar of your typewriter...." You can laugh, but authors pine for such hyperbolic praise. He'd sign every email, Adios.

That's the George I love.

So, adios, George! Now get back to your book!

Garrett Getschow is currently a pilot in the US Air Force flying F22s out of Langley, Virginia. He graduated from the US Air Force Academy in 2013 and started four years on the soccer team as a forward. Oh, and he's George's son.

Dad's students always ask the same question: "What's it like to have George Getschow as your Father?" "Well, my girlfriend sure thinks he's scary," I say with smirk. Then, I think, "If only you knew."

Growing up with George Getschow is like turning in a story every morning, then anxiously awaiting his edits to come back. Only, instead of a story, it's your life. The passion he puts into teaching, editing and writing is just a fraction of what he put into being a father.

Dad does everything in his power to make sure I am the best I could possibly be. Of over 80 collegiate regular season soccer games I played throughout the country, my parents didn't miss a single one. Before each game, he would remind me why "this is the most important game of your life, remember to play with heart." Because, in his mind, every game was. Every game was a chance to prove myself, and every game could be my last. If it were up to him, he would still call me every morning before I jump in my jet to tell me "this is the most important flight of your life."

His passion was contagious. George Getschow was known by the other fans as 'that crazy dad' that ran up and down the sideline yelling at No. 9 and the rest of the team. My teammates would often find me at half-time and ask "Dude, your dad just yelled at me to 'throw some wood in the fire! What does that even mean?'" "He wants you to show more heart," I would tell them. When I wasn't playing up to his standards he would yell "Get in the game, Garrett!" and when he sensed a goal nearing I would hear from across the field, "No. 9, put your dancing shoes on!" He never let me forget to play the best game I possibly could.

At the end of each game, the journalist in him came out. First, probing questions about how I thought I played, then detailed questions on individual parts of the game, then how I thought my performance this game would roll over to the next. In high-school, the 30-minute drive home became a mini-press conference. In college, those Father-Son press conferences were at the nearest bar.

Growing up, I only knew him as Dad. It wasn't until the Mayborn that I saw Professor Getschow at his finest: inspiring students to become published writers in Archer City, toasting his tribe of authors and reinvigorating literary nonfiction for hundreds of people each year at the Mayborn Conference.

After winning our conference championship, we skipped the press conference and had many toasts, as Dad always does. Because there's no better way to celebrate a special occasion than with a toast. So here's to him, my dad.

Paul Knight has been an editor at *Texas Monthly* since 2011. Before that, he wrote for the *Houston Press* and *Texas Observer*.

I met George Getschow in journalism school. That was the beginning. At least, that is the easiest way to accurately describe my beginning with George.

I don't remember much about journalism school before I met George. Except, interview your classmates. Write your own obituary. That kind of thing. In one freshman level newswriting course, taught by a professor who was not George, the professor opened the semester by reading a passage from a famous writer who had done some newspaper work. "Thump! Against the door. Another newspaper, another cruel accusation. Thump! Day after day, it never ends... To teach journalism: Circulation, Distribution, Headline Counting and the classical Pyramid Lead." Thump, indeed.

Things were a bit different with George. Not long after we met, I drove him in my old white pickup from his house to a fancy downtown luncheon in Fort Worth to pass out flyers for the first Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference. George sat on the passenger side of my truck, leaned back, in blue jeans and boots, talking about storytelling to me, a student, upright in department store slacks and loafers. I couldn't understand much he said. I didn't know about structure or plot or finding a proper ending. But George talked, and I listened. As we drove down the interstate and I changed lanes to pass an eighteen-wheeler, I looked over and two rear wheels of the trailer exploded. My heart jumped because I thought the boom from the blowout would shatter the windows of my truck. George looked over, shrugged, said something like, 'Wow,' and continued his impromptu lecture on storytelling. That happened near the beginning of my time in journalism school with George.

He preached the benefits of journaling, and I have one from back then. I flip through it sometimes. It's filled with stuff like this:

June 12, 2005: "Last night several of us sat, sweating, on the front porch, enduring gnats and crickets and listened to George read."

June 13, 2005: "First assignment. I am out in a field."

September 22, 2005: "I am tired from another late night of talking with George about writing, books, literature, life, and the business of being an author."

November 10, 2005: "Back from the bar. We talked about the reason writers drink. It's the only way to stop thinking about story."

That was almost impossible with George. Before long, every day involved working on one story or another. There were trips to the library, lectures in class, workshop sessions, the front porch readings. There was always a book signing or an author's speech to hear. Over time, when I told family or friends what I'd been up to, the way I explained George changed from "my professor" to "my mentor" to, simply, "George."

Those days ended. I'm glad I saved the old journals, and the drafts and edits of the first *Spurs of Inspiration* we worked on together, and even the thousands of emails I have from George. I read through them an evening not too long ago, and one email stood out. I had just sold my first magazine piece, and my editor at the magazine had sent a note saying that he was impressed with the draft. I forwarded that to George and told him I was pleased. He responded, on October 27, 2005: "I am thrilled. Send me the American Legion piece and I'll look at it. I left Virgil's piece in my box in the j-office. I hope you can get started on the rewrite. We're running out of time."

Those days ended, of course, and of course, there's no one like George. I can't see him in retirement. I don't think he will stop all this. There's not enough booze out there to stop thinking about the next story that needs to be written, rewritten, or rewritten some more. There's no ending to that, it can never be good enough. But I will stop now. Put down the pen and pour a glass. To George, cheers.

THE POWER OF WORDS

Bill Marvel spent almost 50 years in newspapers, sometimes reporting, sometimes editing. He has written three books, *The Rock Island Line*, *Isles of the Damned* (with R.V. Burgin) and *Burning Ludlow*, and his freelance work has appeared in *D*, *American Heritage's Invention & Technology*, *American Way*, and *Smithsonian*.

George is teaching class this evening, as it sometimes happens, in a Denton bar just off the main square. Because a classroom is often the worst place to learn something. His students are scattered at tables along one wall, notebooks open and waiting. Neon signs wash the room pink and gold. The young woman who has invited me to speak, one of the students, has met me at the door and escorted me back to meet George. The first impression is of a slightly balding head under a comb-over, an open, Midwestern face, and the hint of a grin. We have Dow-Jones in common. George worked for the mighty *Wall Street Journal*; I worked for the less mighty, now defunct *National Observer*. Other than that, I have no idea who I'm meeting. But his students want to hear something about writing for newspapers. Opposite the students there is a raised platform, ordinarily the bandstand, and a single plastic chair where I am to sit. I am briefly introduced and after polite applause George asks me to talk about my career, how and why I got into it, what I've done with it, what I've learned that might be useful to his class. While I speak, George stands to the side; I do not understand yet that he is often too restless to sit. I start with the most useful thing I can tell them: My paper, the *Dallas Morning News*, that day announced a bruising round of layoffs, the first of many, leaving us shaken and numb. I go on to recap my career up to now. I've done everything you can do at a newspaper, I tell them, except sweep the parking lot. And that may be coming. George stands by silently. I cannot tell what he is thinking.

One of the students asks about the kind of writing I do, which is mostly features. How did I get into that, how did I learn to do it? I talk about the writers I read when I was starting out, how a few of us younger reporters had discovered Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and gone on to read James Agee and John Hersey. How over dinner we passed around worn copies of *Esquire* full of stories by Gay Talese and Tom Wolfe and Joan Didion. This is how we wanted to write. This is who they should also be reading.

As I spoke, I began to sense an unease, a restless little breeze stirring the students' faces as they shifted their eyes to George, to me, back to George. Had I overstayed my time, or overstepped some boundary? One of the students up front, grinning triumphantly, turned to George.



"You guys got together before class and cooked this up, didn't you?"

I had no idea what he was talking about, but George did. And he laughed that great, explosive George-cackle that those of us who spend any time around George instantly recognize. We had not cooked anything up together. But we had grown up almost in the same kitchen, bending over the same stove, stirring the same pots, working from the same recipes, sipping the same soup. What I had been telling George's students that night on that bandstand in that neon soaked bar were the same things he had been telling them week in and out in the classroom: develop these disciplines, study these techniques, honor these values, read these books and learn from these writers.

I don't know what use I was to George's students that night. But I can tell you it was useful to me, and more rewarding and nourishing than I could have foreseen. It's not that we were on the same wavelength. Often we are not, occasionally strenuously. When the book into which I had poured eight years was off the rails, a train wreck, I gave it to George. He read it, and over dinner and beers in a different bar one night he began asking me questions in that George manner. What was it about? Where was it going? Where was the climax, the place of greatest tension, the moment of maximum drama? I told him, and he said

"Start there." I almost whined. I can't start there. That's the whole point of the book. I can't give that away in Chapter One!

I drove home and threw myself into a chair, bruised and brooding. And slowly it occurred to me how I could start there. Or very close to there. My little train was back on the rails and running forward.

This is the thing about George Getschow. If you are very, very lucky in your writing life you may – just may – encounter somebody who is another writer and editor, but more than that. A teacher, but more than that. A friend, but more than that. Someone with whom you share that wave, but more than just the wave, because that person is often way ahead of you, or off to the side where he or she can see you and where you want to go more clearly than you yourself can see -- about writing and so many other things, because writing is never just about writing.

For me – and dozens of other writers I know – this person has been George. He has repaid me the honor of letting me watch over his shoulder from time to time when he thought I might know something about where he wanted to go.

Writing is not taught in the classroom. It is not even taught in a bar over beers. Writing is taught heart to heart.

Leah Waters is a recent graduate of the Mayborn School with an M.A. in journalism. While at UNT, she was berated by George in one of the best classes of her academic career.

Beer in one hand, a fading pen in the other, I circle the last answer on the final exam for George's investigative class on a chilly Monday in December. My fellow amigos and I are sitting around George and Cindy's dining room table, a checkerboard of half-eaten pizza and drinks as centerpiece to this academic gesture meant to measure how much we've learned from the man himself. The questions were boring but necessary: FOIAs, its many exemptions and painfully specific queries about the Texas meat industry, a topic in which our entire class was inextricably engrossed for the months prior.

None of these things, I realized much later, we learned from George. He had a way of teaching us that looked (and sounded) a lot like an interrogation, his innocent but terrified students cowering and averting our eyes under the barrage from across the table.

George's weekly assignment consisted of an impossibly thorough list of questions he wanted answering if we—graduate students implicitly self-assured of our own journalistic chops—were to have a publishable story. And week after exhausting week, our lectures from George about our not unproductive work never varied far from this: "Well, we don't have squat, do we?"

His sharp blue eyes would ping across the room, daring anyone to challenge it.

And although we tried, he was right. We had everything—the good, the bad and the nauseatingly ugly—for our story, except, of course, The Squat: documents that would prove it.

Our team of tired writers left the *Dallas Morning News* Monday nights like deflated balloons, discouraged but with just enough resolve to try and prove George wrong next week. I have full confidence that if we could have spent every day, all day for six months on this project, we could have found The Squat and probably gone on to publish something approaching a must-read story.

Instead, George gave us something more indelible than a byline ever could. He gave us a backbone. The kind that made governmental agencies nervous. The sort that left us with unreturned calls from authorities and unnamed sources with stories of their own. The variety that could intuit the right question to ask to get the answer we needed.

George can take a story that you think is clear and copious and turn it into Swiss cheese, each comment a dart fired into the gaping hole you didn't see until he punctuated it with his Georgian perspective.

I ran across this gem George sent our team the last week we met, the same email that invited us to his house for dinner, conversation over the campfire and the inescapable final exam we would take: "I realize I've played the role of the fierce driver of the slave ship, whip in hand, scowling, shouting, even pouting, about our halting progress from week to week."

His probing questions were his whip, barely a breath between each stabbing inquisition, leaving its mark on our minds in ways too irrevocable to be considered simply academic. He taught us craft by stripping our work to a skeleton and building it into a living narrative, one with a steady pulse and flesh and blood.

That night in December, as we sat and shared stories after a job well done that wasn't quite done, George demanded we notice the moment and the people with whom we shared it. It was a time I won't describe in detail, partially because I had one glass of Belgian ale too many, but mainly because its intimate properties are forever fixed in the moment, inextricably tied to the campfire flames, the Hemingway short story cigars, and the ephemeral glow of being in the presence of one's people.

I will say this: I dispense praise infrequently and impartially, so when I do, you can take it to the bank. The life and legacy of George deserves more than just a brief and sentimental toast on a crisp Monday in December. Far after George's bones are in the ground, we and others that follow will speak of him with respect, awe and gratitude. I'm grateful to have lived and recorded a sliver of it. Here's to George, his work and all the ways in which he's made us feel worthy of such a calling as storytelling.

Sarah Perry is a marketing project manager for LabCorp and a freelance writer in Greensboro, NC. While her day job is editing scientific and sales presentations, her true passion is incessantly pressing the dial button on George Getschow's contact card in her phone.

My relationship with George Getschow has forever been punctuated by a beep, a pause, and a nasally message: "Hi! This is George Getschow." (Or, on really bad days, "The voice mailbox belonging to this number is full.")

That man will not answer his damn phone. The great thing is that the greatest lesson of George taught me was to never give up.

So I keep on calling.

I first met George in August 2008 during his feature writing class. I'd moved from Kentucky to learn how to write, and Mitch Land promised me that George Getschow would turn me into a prolific journalist; no doubt I'd one day win a Pulitzer Prize (he was very convincing). I believed him.

On the first day of class, George wore his signature black jeans and black cowboy boots, and I'd already heard the legendary tales about him in the GAB halls. He was laboring over a book that was destined to be a *New York Times* bestseller, and he could turn any student into a literary nonfiction poetic powerhouse. Luckily for me, I was a Mayborn scholar, and I had to choose a mentor.

"What do you want from me?" George asked me when I eagerly informed him that I was his next protégé.

"Teach me everything you know."

Over the next few years, George took me under his wing. He taught me what we all know as George jargon: how to write a nut graf—and identify it in one word—how to find the deepest meaning of a story, how to weave in universal truths, how to never, ever give up.

Each time I offered an excuse to George, he told me to figure it out. Once when I couldn't find a source for a story, he told me to go knock on their door. When I proudly sent him my first cover story for *Fort Worth Weekly*, he called me and told me I'd messed up and that I should have asked the characters in the story how they transformed from animal lovers into running a puppy mill.

And he was right.

From George, I also learned how to study people, to shut up and really listen, and that being judgmental is (shocking!) a flaw, not a strength. George taught me to appreciate people in a way I never had before, to respect people no matter their circumstances or history or choices.

My relationship with George changed over the years from mentor to friend to father figure. When I took the leap from magazine writing into corporate marketing, George was the last person I wanted to tell that I'd crossed over to the dark side. But when he finally answered his phone, his only response was, "If you're happy, that's all I care about."

Now this remarkable man is retiring to finish that surefire *New York Times* bestseller. I'm eagerly waiting on George to not give up, to not quit, to be relentless like he taught me. Sarita is calling, George. You best answer.



Michael J. Mooney writes for *Texas Monthly*, *GQ*, *ESPN The Magazine*, and several other publications. He's also the co-director of the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference.

When I first met George, he was carrying dozens of books into the Spur Hotel in Archer City. It was the first day of the first Archer City class, and my first day of journalism school. Most of the students had driven out to the hotel the night before and we'd gathered that morning, wondering aloud what we'd all just gotten ourselves into. This was before the first Mayborn conference. Before sites like *Longreads* and *Longform*. Before magazines and newspapers all over the country created special sections and elaborate designs that accentuate narrative journalism. Back in 2005, we students weren't so sure. What, exactly, was this "literary nonfiction"?

George showed us. In the works that we read and discussed as a class. In the lectures, about building characters and establishing "a sense of place." Though many of us had been reading magazines and nonfiction books for a while by then, this was the first time most of us heard about applying the tools of fiction writing to a world of verifiable facts.

Several of the people in that class, and the subsequent classes in Archer City, have gone on to work for big-name newspapers and magazines. Several have secured book deals with important publishers. And a few have remained close friends, attending each other's weddings and celebrating each other's accomplishments. (Some of us even married our fellow students.) Though it's not as often as we'd like, we still get together and talk about stories, and we still edit each other.

This is the foundation of what George often calls "The Tribe." It's a term I haven't always been comfortable with. I don't really consider myself a "joiner" per se. I'm also from a different, more sensitive generation, and that word has the ring of cultural appropriation. But it's also accurate. This group of writers and editors, of friends and family, has a special bond. It's apparent anytime there's a get-together, but especially at the annual Mayborn conference.

And George himself has had an outsized influence on the lives of his former students. He hasn't just helped us make our stories better. He's also helped us get jobs and establish careers. He's given us advice: about interviewing and immersing ourselves in stories, about dealing with editors, about dealing with readers. (The author Bryan Burrough has a great story about the time George, a *Wall Street Journal* bureau chief in Houston at the time, yelled at him until he cried—because Burrough had been rude to a newspaper subscriber.)

So there's some irony in the fact that it's so hard to find the right words to describe what George means to us. There's no single story that explains his role—not even a massive tome could do it justice. For me, he's been more than a mentor in the professional sense of the word. He's been more than a friend. He's been a proud surrogate father, encouraging me at every stage of my career. I still ask his advice all the time. I'm still excited to share new stories and life updates with him. I'm still as motivated and inspired by him as I was in Archer City all those years ago.

I joke about how much credit George takes for my success and the successes of other people in his sphere of influence. "When George met me, I was a young Bolivian boy who spoke no English," I sometimes say. Or: "George is responsible for so many of the accomplishments of his students—just ask him!" But the jokes are based in truth. There's no way to know where any of us would be if not for George. But we wouldn't be where we are today.

Sometimes I still wonder what I got myself into when I signed up for that first class. I wonder what I got myself into by becoming a member of the storytelling tribe George willed into existence. But I know I'm glad I did.

Eric Nishimoto has been many things, most recently an author of a historical novella and a historical memoir in the works, and an adjunct professor at the Mayborn. Thanks to George Getschow and Cathy Booth Thomas he deluded himself into thinking that he could actually lead the Mayborn magazine class this year.

The Man has given me the one Thing I have been searching for my whole life.

Big statement, but George Getschow is a Big Man. Or at least his mind and heart are. Big enough to hold the keys to the literary universe, whether it's teaching us aspiring but relatively illiterate students how to really write, or creating the Mayborn Literary Nonfiction Conference and growing it into the country's premiere gathering of accomplished and not-yet-there writers to share the love of story, or knowing that a small nondescript town in the middle of nowhere Texas was actually the undiscovered birthplace for writers, leading to the now extinct but storied Archer City Writers Workshop. And big enough to care that all he's learned in a lifetime devoted to and sacrificed for the craft should be passed down to those of us trying to follow after him.

But I come to thank George, not to eulogize him.

Thank you, George, for showing me how to be a real writer, which goes way beyond the mechanics and pretty words to the rigors of sharpening your mind and tenderizing and toughening your heart at the same time.

Thank you, George, for showing me how good a writer I can be while simultaneously showing me how awful a writer I am. And for actually making me want to rewrite a piece (are my sixteen rewrites still a record?).

Thank you, George, for showing me how to toast, not in a jejune Toastmasters way, but on a tailgate under an unlimited starry sky to relative strangers, with you pushing me to expose my innermost thoughts and heart in a vigorous exercise in expressive thought.

Thank you, George, for showing me how much I can actually drink and still function, and for somehow showing me that all that can actually be purposeful.

Thank you, George, for helping me finally discover what I was born to do, so I can live the rest of my life with no regrets. And for being an inspirational mentor and a dear friend.

STAFF PICKS

MOST POWERFUL WORDS



Tyler Hicks

"I cannot fix on the hour, or the spot, or the look or the words, which laid the foundation. It is too long ago. I was in the middle before I knew that I had begun." - Jane Austen



Rita Unogwo

"Words have energy and power with the ability to help, to heal, to hinder, to hurt, to harm, to humiliate and to humble." - Yehuda Berg



Jade Byers

"Real eyes realize real lies"
- Tupac Shakur RIP



Amanda Talbot

"If you live for people's acceptance, you'll die from their rejection." Lecrae



Angela Roe

"He must become greater; I must become less."
- John 3:30, The Bible

I'm regrettably quick to forget this truth, one that I aim to make the cornerstone of my life. In a world like ours, where all are guilty, especially me, of an utterly worthless pursuit—seeking the approval of men, money, accolades—this verse gently redirects my heart and mind. The God of the universe, Maker of all creation, the One Who Holds All Things Together, is the only righteous pursuit—my sole source of strength and my portion forever.



Leah E. Waters

"To a great mind, nothing is little." – Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *A Study in Scarlet*

Sherlock Holmes saved my life, among many others I presume. When reality was a disappointing alternative to *The Game* and its players in Doyle's adventures, I would spend most of my days under a tree somewhere with nothing but Holmes and my imagination for company.



Kevin Ryan

"May my heart always be open to little birds who are the secret of living whatever they sing is better to know and if men should not hear them men are old." – e.e. cummings

I bought a bird feeder for my back porch after I read this stanza. And when I write I leave the door open, even if only just a little.



Jesika Fisher

"We're all stories in the end. Just make it a good one, eh?"
- *The Doctor, Doctor Who*

What's the point of a writer, if not to tell a story that's remembered and felt long after someone reads it? Having the ability to create such an impact that it resonates beyond one's lifetime and shapes the lives of generations of people is a testament to the power of words. I can think of no greater legacy.



Luissana Cardenas

"I became a Journalist to be as close as possible to the heart of the world." Henry R. Luce

I like this quote because it says what really means to be a journalism for me. That is the first reason why I decided to be a journalist.



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The Frank W. and Sue Mayborn School of Journalism at the University of North Texas is partnering with MediaShift to produce the Journalism School Hackathon on the weekend of October 20-22, 2017. We're convening a group of top students (graduates and undergraduates), faculty and professionals for the weekend Hackathon, with a real-world mission of creating startups in the sports and health areas. Students will have a chance to collaborate on diverse teams of students with faculty and pro facilitators. Students can apply for Travel Scholarships up to \$500.

Learn more and register at www.mediashift.org.

Spring 2018

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Entries for next year's Best American Newspaper Narratives contest must be received by February 15, 2018. Work must be published between January 1 and December 31, 2017. Don't miss your chance to be published in our annual anthology.

Entries for our Mayborn writing contests must be received no later than May 1, 2018 – so make plans to enter now. A total of \$18,000 in cash prizes is awarded for top entries in our Reported Narrative, Personal Essay and Book Manuscript competitions. For more information, visit www.themayborn.com/contests.

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